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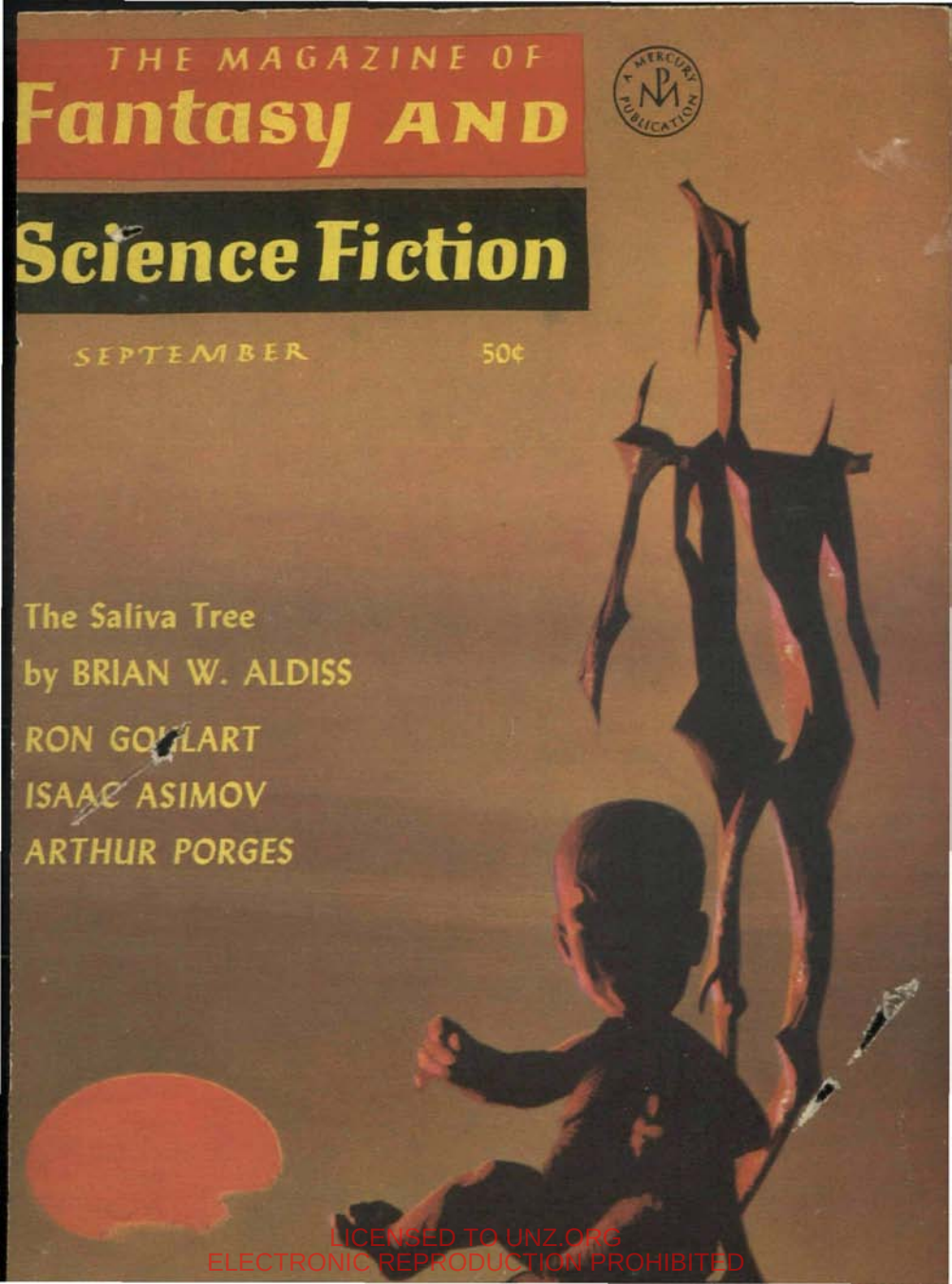
The Saliva Tree
by BRIAN W. ALDISS

RON GOULART
ISAAC ASIMOV
ARTHUR PORGES



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Fantasy and Science Fiction

SEPTEMBER *Including Venture Science Fiction*

The Saliva Tree (*short novel*)	BRIAN W. ALDISS	4
Cartoon	GAHAN WILSON	55
Kearny's Last Case	RON GOULART	56
Books	JUDITH MERRIL	66
The Great Cosmic Donut of Life	RAY NELSON	74
Lunar Landing	THEODORE L. THOMAS	93
Hog-Belly Honey	R. A. LAFFERTY	95
Turning Point	ARTHUR PORGES	103
Science: Death in the Laboratory	ISAAC ASIMOV	109
Sea Bright	HAL R. MOORE	119
F & SF Marketplace		129

Cover by Bert Tanner for "The Saliva Tree"

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Much science fiction is set in the future, grapples with the present, and is affectionate toward the past. Brian Aldiss scrambles up that generality a bit in this story, in which he depicts an alien "invasion" at the turn of the century, the time when Mr. Herbert George Wells was at his literary peak. Indeed, Mr. Wells plays some small part in the humorous and terrifying and absolutely entertaining narration you are about to read.

THE SALIVA TREE

by Brian W. Aldiss

There is neither speech nor language: but their voices are heard among them. Psalm XIX.

"YOU KNOW, I'M REALLY MUCH exercised about the Fourth Dimension," said the fair-haired young man, with a suitable earnestness in his voice.

"Um," said his companion, staring up at the night sky.

"It seems very much in evidence these days. Do you not think you catch a glimpse of it in the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley?"

"Um," said his companion.

They stood together on a low rise to the east of the sleepy East Anglian town of Cottersall, watching the stars, shivering a little in the chill February air. They are both young men in their early twenties. The one who is occupied with the Fourth Dimension is called Bruce Fox; he is tall and fair, and works as junior clerk in the Norwich firm of lawyers, Prendergast and Tout. The other, who has so far vouchsafed us only an *um* or two, although he is to figure largely as the hero of our account, is by name Gregory Rolles. He is tall and dark, with grey eyes set in his handsome and intelli-

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gent face. He and Fox have sworn to Think Large, thus distinguishing themselves, at least in their own minds, from all the rest of the occupants of Cottersall in these last years of the nineteenth century.

"There's another!", exclaimed Gregory, breaking at last from the realm of monosyllables. He pointed a gloved finger up at the constellation of Auriga the Charioteer. A meteor streaked across the sky like a runaway flake of the Milky Way, and died in mid-air.

"Beautiful!", they said together.

"It's funny," Fox said, prefacing his words with an oft-used phrase, "the stars and men's minds are so linked together and always have been, even in the centuries of ignorance before Charles Darwin. They always seem to play an ill-defined role in man's affairs. They help me think large too, don't they you, Greg?"

"You know what I think—I think that some of those stars may be occupied. By people, I mean." He breathed heavily, overcome by what he was saying. "People who —perhaps they are better than us, live in a just society, wonderful people. . . ."

"I know, Socialists to a man!" Fox exclaimed. This was one point on which he did not share his friend's advanced thinking. He had listened to Mr. Tout talking in the office, and thought he knew better than his rich friend how these socialists, of which one heard so much these days, were undermining society. "Stars full of socialists!"

"Better than stars full of Christians! Why, if the stars were full of Christians, no doubt they would already have sent missionaries down here to preach their Gospel."

"I wonder if there ever will be planetary journeys as predicted by Nunsowe Greene and Monsieur Jules Verne—" Fox said, when the appearance of a fresh meteor stopped him in mid-sentence.

Like the last, this meteor seemed to come from the general direction of Auriga. It travelled slowly, and it glowed red, and it sailed grandly towards them. They both exclaimed at once, and gripped each other by the arm. The magnificent spark burned in the sky, larger now, so that its red aura appeared to encase a brighter orange glow. It passed overhead (afterwards, they argued whether it had not made a slight noise as it passed), and disappeared below a clump of willow. They knew it had been near. For an instant, the land had shone with its light.

Gregory was the first to speak.

"Bruce, Bruce, did you see that? That was no ordinary fireball!"

"It was so big! What was it?"

"Perhaps our heavenly visitor has come at last!"

"Hey, Greg, it must have landed by your friends' farm—the Grendon place—mustn't it?"

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"You're right! I must pay old Mr. Grendon a visit tomorrow and see if he or his family saw anything of this."

They talked excitedly, stamping their feet as they exercised their lungs. Their conversation was the conversation of optimistic young men, and included much speculative matter that began "Wouldn't it be wonderful if—", or "Just supposing—" Then they stopped and laughed at their own absurd beliefs.

Fox said slyly, "So you'll be seeing all the Grendon family tomorrow?"

"It seems probable, unless that red hot planetary ship has already borne them off to a better world."

"Tell us true, Greg—you really go to see that pretty Nancy Grendon, don't you?"

Gregory struck his friend playfully on the shoulder.

"No need for your jealousy, Bruce! I go to see the father, not the daughter. Though the one is female, the other is progressive, and that must interest me more just yet. Nancy has beauty, true, but her father—ah, her father has electricity!"

Laughing, they cheerfully shook hands and parted for the night.

On Grendon's farm, things were a deal less tranquil, as Gregory was to discover.

Gregory Rolles rose before seven next morning as was his custom. It was while he was lighting his gas mantle, and wishing Mr. Fenn (the baker in whose house Gregory lodged) would install electricity, that a swift train of thought led him to reflect again on the phenomenal thing in the previous night's sky. He let his mind wander luxuriously over all the possibilities that the 'meteor' illuminated. He decided that he would ride out to see Mr. Grendon within the hour.

He was lucky in being able, at this stage in his life, to please himself largely as to how his days were spent, for his father was a person of some substance. Edward Rolles had had the fortune, at the time of the Crimean War, to meet Escoffier, and with some help from the great chef had brought onto the market a baking powder, 'Eugenol', that, being slightly more palatable and less deleterious to the human system than its rivals, had achieved great commercial success. As a result, Gregory had attended one of the Cambridge colleges.

Now, having gained a degree, he was poised on the verge of a career. But which career? He had acquired—more as result of his intercourse with other students than with those officially deputed to instruct him—some understanding of the sciences; his essays had been praised and some of his poetry published, so that he inclined towards literature; and an uneasy sense that life for everyone outside the privileged classes con-

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tained too large a proportion of misery led him to think seriously of a political career. In Divinity, too, he was well-grounded; but at least the idea of Holy Orders did not tempt him.

While he wrestled with his future, he undertook to live away from home, since his relations with his father were never smooth. By rusticating himself in the heart of East Anglia, he hoped to gather material for a volume tentatively entitled "Wanderings with a Socialist Naturalist", which would assuage all sides of his ambitions. Nancy Grendon, who had a pretty hand with a pencil, might even excute a little emblem for the title page. . . . Perhaps he might be permitted to dedicate it to his author friend, Mr. Herbert George Wells. . . .

He dressed himself warmly, for the morning was cold as well as dull, and went down to the baker's stables. When he had saddled his mare, Daisy, he swung himself up and set out along a road that the horse knew well.

The land rose slightly towards the farm, the area about the house forming something of a little island amid marshy ground and irregular stretches of water that gave back to the sky its own dun tone. The gate over the little bridge was, as always, open wide; Daisy picked her way through the mud to the stables, where Gregory left her to champ oats contentedly. Cuff and her pup, Lardie, barked loudly about Gregory's heels as usual, and he patted their heads on his way over to the house.

Nancy came hurrying out to meet him before he got to the front door.

"We had some excitement last night, Gregory," she said. He noted with pleasure she had at last brought herself to use his first name.

"Something bright and glaring!" she said. "I was retiring, when this noise come and then this light, and I rush to look out through the curtains, and there's this here great thing like an egg sinking into our pond." In her speech, and particularly when she was excited, she carried the lilting accent of Norfolk.

"The meteor!" Gregory exclaimed. "Bruce Fox and I were out last night, as we were the night before, watching for the lovely Aurigids that arrive every February, when we saw an extra big one. I said then it was coming over very near here."

"Why, it almost landed on our house," Nancy said. She looked very pleasing this morning, with her lips red, her cheeks shining, and her chestnut curls all astray. As she spoke, her mother appeared in apron and cap, with a wrap hurriedly thrown over her shoulders.

"Nancy, you come in, standing freezing like that! You ent daft, girl, are you? Hello, Gregory, how

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be going on? I didn't reckon as we'd see you today. Come in and warm yourself."

"Good-day to you, Mrs. Grendon. I'm hearing about your wonderful meteor of last night."

"It was a falling star, according to Bert Neckland. I ent sure what it was, but it certainly stirred up the animals, that I *do* know."

"Can you see anything of it in the pond?" Gregory asked.

"Let me show you," Nancy said.

Mrs. Grendon returned indoors. She went slowly and grandly, her back very straight and an unaccustomed load before her. Nancy was her only daughter; there was a younger son, Archie, a stubborn lad who had fallen at odds with his father and now was apprenticed to a blacksmith in Norwich; and no other children living. Three infants had not survived the mixture of fogs alternating with bitter east winds that comprised the typical Cottersall winter. But now the farmer's wife was unexpectedly gavid again, and would bear her husband another baby when the spring came in.

As Nancy led Gregory over to the pond, he saw Grendon with his two labourers working in the West Field, but they did not wave.

"Was your father not excited by the arrival last night?"

"That he was—when it happened! He went out with his shot gun, and Bert Neckland with him. But there was nothing to see but bubbles in the pond and steam over it, and this morning he wouldn't discuss it, and said that work must go on whatever happen."

They stood beside the pond, a dark and extensive slab of water with rushes on the farther bank and open country beyond. As they looked at its ruffled surface, they stood with the windmill black and bulky on their left hand. It was to this that Nancy now pointed.

Mud had been splashed across the boards high up the sides of the mill; some was to be seen even on the top of the nearest white sail. Gregory surveyed it all with interest. Nancy, however, was still pursuing her own line of thought.

"Don't you reckon Father works too hard, Gregory? When he ent outside doing jobs, he's in reading his pamphlets and his electricity manuals. He never rests but when he sleeps."

"Um. Whatever went into the pond went in with a great smack! There's no sign of anything there now, is there? Not that you can see an inch below the surface."

"You being a friend of his, Mum thought perhaps as you'd say something to him. He don't go to bed till ever so late—sometimes it's near midnight, and then he's up again at three and a half o'clock. Would you speak to him? You know Mother dassent."

"Nancy, we ought to see whatever it was that went in the pond. It can't have dissolved. How deep

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is the water? Is it very deep?"

"Oh, you aren't listening, Gregory Rolles! Bother the old meteor!"

"This is a matter of science, Nancy. Don't you see—"

"Oh, rotten old science, is it? Then I don't want to hear. I'm cold, standing out here. You can have a good look if you like but I'm going in before I gets froze. It was only an old stone out of the sky, because I heard Father and Bert Neckland agree to it."

"Fat lot Bert Neckland knows about such things!" he called to her departing back.

He looked down at the dark water. Whatever it *was* that had arrived last night, it was here, only a few feet from him. He longed to discover what remained of it. Vivid pictures entered his mind: his name in headlines in 'The Morning Post', the Royal Society making him an honorary member, his father embracing him and pressing him to return home.

Thoughtfully, he walked over to the barn. Hens ran clucking out of his way as he entered and stood looking up, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. There, as he remembered it, was a little rowing boat. Perhaps in his courting days old Mr. Grendon had taken his prospective wife out for excursions on the Oast in it. Surely it had not been used in years. He dragged the boat from the barn and launched it in the shallows of the pond. It floated. The boards had dried, and water leaked through a couple of seams, but not nearly enough to deter him. Climbing delicately in among the straw and filth, he pushed off.

When he was over the approximate centre of the pond, he shipped his oars and peered over the side. There was an agitation in the water, and nothing could be seen, although he imagined much.

As he stared over the one side, the boat unexpectedly tipped to the other. Gregory swung round. The boat listed heavily to the left, so that the oars rolled over that way. He could see nothing. Yet—he heard something. It was a sound much like a hound slowly panting. And whatever made it was about to capsize the boat.

"What is it?" he said, as all the skin prickled up his back and skull.

The boat lurched, for all the world as if someone invisible were trying to get into it. Frightened, he grasped the oar, and, without thinking, swept it over that side of the rowing boat.

It struck something solid where there was only air.

Dropping the oar in surprise, he put out his hand. It touched something yielding. At the same time, his arm was violently struck.

His actions were then entirely governed by instinct. Thought did not enter the matter. He picked up the oar again and smote the thin

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air with it. It hit something. There was a splash, and the boat righted itself so suddenly he was almost pitched into the water. Even while it still rocked, he was rowing frantically for the shallows, dragging the boat from the water, and running for the safety of the farm house.

Only at the door did he pause. His reason returned, his heart began gradually to stop stammering its fright. He stood looking at the seamed wood of the porch, trying to evaluate what he had seen and what had actually happened. But what had happened?

Forcing himself to go back to the pond, he stood by the boat and looked across the sullen face of the water. It lay undisturbed, except by surface ripples. He looked at the boat. A quantity of water lay in the bottom of it. He thought, all that happened was that I nearly capsized, and I let my idiot fears run away with me. Shaking his head, he pulled the boat back to the barn.

Gregory, as he often did, stayed to eat lunch at the farm, but he saw nothing of the farmer till milking time.

Joseph Grendon was in his late forties, and a few years older than his wife. He had a gaunt solemn face and a heavy beard that made him look older than he was. For all his seriousness, he greeted Gregory civilly enough. They stood together in the gathering dusk as the cows swung behind them into their regular stalls. Together they walked into the machine house next door, and Grendon lit the oil burners that started the steam engine into motion that would turn the generator that would supply the vital spark.

"I smell the future in here," Gregory said, smiling. By now, he had forgotten the shock of the morning.

"The future will have to get on without me. I shall be dead by then." The farmer spoke as he walked, putting each word reliably before the next.

"That is what you always say. You're wrong—the future is rushing upon us."

"You ent far wrong there, Master Gregory, but I won't have no part of it, I reckon. I'm an old man now. Here she come!"

This last exclamation was directed at a flicker of light in the pilot bulb overhead. They stood there contemplating with satisfaction the wonderful machinery. As steam pressure rose, the great leather belt turned faster and faster, and the flicker in the pilot bulb grew stronger. Although Gregory was used to a home lit by both gas and electricity, he never felt the excitement of it as he did here, out in the wilds, where the nearest incandescent bulb was probably in Norwich, a great part of a day's journey away.

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Now a pale flickering radiance illuminated the room. By contrast, everything outside looked black. Grendon nodded in satisfaction, made some adjustments to the burners, and they went outside.

Free from the bustle of the steam engine, they could hear the noise the cows were making. At milking time, the animals were usually quiet; something had upset them. The farmer ran quickly into the milking shed, with Gregory on his heels.

The new light, radiating from a bulb hanging above the stalls, showed the beasts of restless demeanour and rolling eye. Bert Neckland stood as far away from the door as possible, grasping his stick and letting his mouth hang open.

"What in blazes you staring at, bor?" Grendon asked.

Neckland slowly shut his mouth.

"We had a scare," he said. "Something come in here," he said.

"Did you see what it was?" Gregory asked.

"No, there weren't nothing to see. It was a ghost, that's what it was. It came right in here and touched the cows. It touched me too. It was a ghost."

The farmer snorted. "A tramp more like. You couldn't see because the light wasn't on."

His man shook his head emphatically. "Light weren't that bad. I tell you, whatever it was, it come right up to me and touched me." He stopped, and pointed to the edge of the stall. "Look there! See, I weren't telling you no lie, master. It was a ghost, and there's its wet hand-print."

They crowded round and examined the worn and chewed timber at the corner of the partition between two stalls. An indefinite patch of moisture darkened the wood. Gregory's thoughts went back to his experience on the pond, and again he felt the prickle of unease along his spine. But the farmer said stoutly, "Nonsense, it's a bit of cowslime. Now you get on with the milking, Bert, and let's have no more hossing about, because I want my tea. Where's Cuff?"

Bert looked defiant.

"If you don't believe me, maybe you'll believe the bitch. She saw whatever it was and went for it. It kicked her over, but she ran it out of here."

"I'll see if I can see her," Gregory said.

He ran outside and began calling the bitch. By now it was almost entirely dark. He could see nothing moving in the wide space of the front yard, and so set off in the other direction, down the path towards the pig sties and the fields, calling Cuff as he went. He paused. Low and savage growls sounded ahead, under the elm trees. It was Cuff. He went slowly forward. At this moment, he cursed

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that electric light meant lack of lanterns, and wished too that he had a weapon.

"Who's there?" he called.

The farmer came up by his side. "Let's charge 'em!"

They ran forward. The trunks of the four great elms were clear against the western sky, with water glinting leadenly behind them. The dog became visible. As Gregory saw Cuff, she sailed into the air, whirled round, and flew at the farmer. He flung up his arms and warded off the body. At the same time, Gregory felt a rush of air as if someone unseen had run past him, and a stale muddy smell filled his nostrils. Staggering, he looked behind him. The wan light from the cowsheds spread across the path between the outhouses and the farmhouse. Beyond the light, more distantly, was the silent countryside behind the grain store. Nothing untoward could be seen.

"They killed my old Cuff," said the farmer.

Gregory knelt down beside him to look at the bitch. There was no mark of injury on her, but she was dead, her fine head lying limp.

"She knew there was something there," Gregory said. "She went to attack whatever it was and it got her first. What was it? Whatever in the world was it?"

"They killed my old Cuff," said the farmer again, unhearing. He picked the body up in his arms, turned, and carried it towards the house. Gregory stood where he was, mind and heart equally uneasy.

He jumped violently when a step sounded nearby. It was Bert Neckland.

"What, did that there ghost kill the old bitch?" he asked.

"It killed the bitch certainly, but it was something more terrible than a ghost."

"That's one of them ghosts, bor. I seen plenty in my time. I ent afraid of ghosts, are you?"

"You looked fairly sick in the cowshed a minute ago."

The farmhand put his fists on his hips. He was no more than a couple of years older than Gregory, a stocky young man with a spotty complexion and a snub nose that gave him at once an air of comedy and menace. "Is that so, Master Gregory? Well, you looks pretty funky standing there now."

"I am scared. I don't mind admitting it. But only because we have something here a lot nastier than any spectre."

Neckland came a little closer.

"Then if you are so blooming windy, perhaps you'll be staying away from the farm in future."

"Certainly not." He tried to edge back into the light, but the labourer got in his way.

"If I was you, I should stay away." He emphasized his point by digging an elbow into Gregory's coat. "And just remember that Nancy was interested in me long afore you come along, bor."

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"Oh, that's it, is it! I think Nancy can decide for herself in whom she is interested, don't you?"

"I'm *telling* you who she's interested in, see? And mind you don't forget, see?" He emphasized the words with another nudge. Gregory pushed his arm away angrily. Neckland shrugged his shoulders and walked off. As he went, he said, "You're going to get worse than ghosts if you keep hanging round here."

Gregory was shaken. The suppressed violence in the man's voice suggested that he had been harbouring malice for some time. Unsuspectingly, Gregory had always gone out of his way to be cordial, had regarded the sullenness as mere slow-wittedness and done his socialist best to overcome the barrier between them. He thought of following Neckland and trying to make it up with him; but that would look too feeble. Instead, he followed the way the farmer had gone with his dead bitch, and made for the house.

Gregory Rolles was too late back to Cottersall that night to meet his friend Fox. The next night, the weather became exceedingly chill and Gabriel Woodcock, the oldest inhabitant, was prophesying snow before the winter was out (a not very venturesome prophesy to be fulfilled within forty-eight hours, thus impressing most of the inhabitants of the village, for they took pleasure in being impressed and exclaiming and saying "Well I never!" to each other). The two friends met in 'The Wayfarer', where the fires were bigger, though the ale was weaker, than in the 'Three Poachers' at the other end of the village.

Seeing to it that nothing dramatic was missed from his account, Gregory related the affairs of the previous day, omitting any reference to Neckland's pugnacity. Fox listened fascinated, neglecting both his pipe and his ale.

"So you see how it is, Bruce," Gregory concluded. "In that deep pond by the mill lurks a vehicle of some sort, the very one we saw in the sky, and in it lives an invisible being of evil intent. You see how I fear for my friends there. Should I tell the police about it, do you think?"

"I'm sure it would not help the Grendons to have old Farrish bumping out there on his penny-farthing," Fox said, referring to the local representative of the law. He took a long draw first on the pipe and then on the glass. "But I'm not sure you have your conclusions quite right, Greg. Understand, I don't doubt the facts, amazing though they are. I mean, we were more or less expecting celestial visitants. The world's recent blossoming with gas and electric lighting in its cities at night must have been a signal to half the nations of space that we are now civ-

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ilized down here. But have our visitants done any deliberate harm to anyone?"

"They nearly drowned me and they killed poor Cuff. I don't see what you're getting at. They haven't begun in a very friendly fashion, have they now?"

"Think what the situation must seem like to them. Suppose they come from Mars or the Moon—we know their world must be absolutely different from Earth. They may be terrified. And it can hardly be called an unfriendly act to try and get into your rowing boat. The first unfriendly act was yours, when you struck out with the oar."

Gregory bit his lip. His friend had a point. "I was scared."

"It may have been because they were scared that they killed Cuff. The dog attacked them, after all, didn't she? I feel sorry for these creatures, alone in an unfriendly world."

"You keep saying 'these'! As far as we know, there is only one of them."

"My point is this, Greg. You have completely gone back on your previous enlightened attitude. You are all for killing these poor things instead of trying to speak to them. Remember what you were saying about other worlds being full of socialists? Try thinking of these chaps as invisible socialists and see if that doesn't make them easier to deal with."

Gregory fell to stroking his chin. Inwardly, he acknowledged that Bruce Fox's words made a great impression on him. He had allowed panic to prejudice his judgment; as a result, he had behaved as immoderately as a savage in some remote corner of the Empire, confronted by his first steam locomotive.

"I'd better get back to the farm and sort things out as soon as possible," he said. "If these things really do need help, I'll help them."

"That's it. But try not to think of them as 'things'. Think of them as—as—I know, as The Aurigans."

"Aurigans it is. But don't be so smug, Bruce. If you'd been in that boat—"

"I know, old friend. I'd have died of fright." To this monument of tact, Fox added, "Do as you say, go back and sort things out as soon as possible. I'm longing for the next instalment of this mystery. It's quite the jolliest thing since Sherlock Holmes."

Gregory Rolles went back to the farm. But the sorting out of which Bruce had spoken took longer than he expected. This was chiefly because the Aurigans seemed to have settled quietly into their new home after the initial day's troubles.

They came forth no more from the pond, as far as he could discover; at least they caused no more disturbance. The young graduate particularly regretted this

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since he had taken his friend's words much to heart, and wanted to prove how enlightened and benevolent he was towards this strange form of life. After some days, he came to believe the Aurigans must have left as unexpectedly as they arrived. Then a minor incident convinced him otherwise; and that same night, in his snug room over the baker's shop, he described it to his correspondent in Worcester Park, Surrey.

"Dear Mr. Wells,

"I must apologise for my failure to write earlier, owing to lack of news concerning the Grendon Farm affair.

"Only today, the Aurigans showed themselves again!—If indeed 'showed' is the right word for invisible creatures.

"Nancy Grendon and I were in the orchard feeding the hens. There is still much snow lying about, and everywhere is very white. As the poultry came running to Nancy's tub, I saw a disturbance further down the orchard—merely some snow dropping from an apple bough, but the movement caught my eye, and I then saw a *procession* of falling snow proceed towards us from tree to tree. The grass is long there, and I soon noted the stalks being thrust aside by *an unknown agency!* I directed Nancy's attention to the phenomenon. The motion in the grass stopped only a few yards from us.

"Nancy was startled, but I determined to acquit myself more like a Briton than I had previously. Accordingly, I advanced and said, 'Who are you? What do you want? We are your friends if you are friendly.'

"No answer came. I stepped forward again, and now the grass again fell back, and I could see by the way it was pressed down that the creature must have large feet. By the movement of the grasses, I could see he was running. I cried to him and ran too. He went round the side of the house, and then over the frozen mud in the farmyard I could see no further trace of him. But instinct led me forward, past the barn to the pond.

"Surely enough, I then saw the cold, muddy water rise and heave, as if engulfing a body that slid quietly in. Shards of broken ice were thrust aside, and by an outward motion, I could see where the strange being went. In a flurry and a small whirlpool, he was gone, and I have no doubt dived down to the mysterious star vehicle.

"These things—people—I know not what to call them—must be aquatic; perhaps they live in the canals of the Red Planet. But imagine, Sir—an

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invisible mankind! The idea is almost as wonderful and fantastic as something from your novel, 'The Time Machine'.

"Pray give me your comment, and trust in my sanity and accuracy as a reporter!

"Yours in friendship,
"Gregory Rolles."

What he did not tell was the way Nancy had clung to him after, in the warmth of the parlour, and confessed her fear. And he had scorned the idea that these beings could be hostile, and had seen the admiration in her eyes, and had thought that she was, after all, a dashed pretty girl, and perhaps worth braving the wrath of those two very different people for: Edward Rolles, his father, and Bert Neckland, the farm labourer.

It was at lunch a week later, when Gregory was again at the farm, taking with him an article on electricity as a pretext for his visit, that the subject of the stinking dew was first discussed.

Grubby was the first to mention it in Gregory's hearing. Grubby, with Bert Neckland, formed the whole strength of Joseph Grendon's labour force; but whereas Neckland was considered couth enough to board in the farmhouse (he had a gaunt room in the attic), Grubby was fit only to sleep in a little flint-and-chalk hut well away from the farm building. His 'house', as he dignified the miserable hut, stood below the orchard and near the sties, the occupants of which lulled Grubby to sleep with their snorts.

"Reckon we ent ever had a dew like that before, Mr. Grendon," he said, his manner sugesting to Gregory that he had made this observation already this morning; Grubby never ventured to say anything original.

"Heavy as an autumn dew," said the farmer firmly, as if there had been an argument on that point.

Silence fell, broken only by a general munching and, from Grubby, a particular guzzling, as they all made their way through huge platefuls of stewed rabbit and dumplings.

"It weren't no ordinary dew, that I do know," Grubby said after a while.

"It stank of toadstools," Neckland said. "Or rotten pond water."

More munching.

"It may be something to do with the pond," Gregory said. "Some sort of freak of evaporation."

Neckland snorted. From his position at the top of the table, the farmer halted his shovelling operations to point a fork at Gregory.

"You may well be right there. Because I tell you what, that there dew only come down on our land and property. A yard the other side of the gate, the road was dry. Bone dry it was."

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"Right you are there, master," Neckland agreed. "And while the West Field was dripping with the stuff, I saw for myself that the bracken over the hedge weren't wet at all. Ah, it's a rum go!"

"Say what you like, we ent ever had a dew like it," Grubby said. He appeared to be summing up the feeling of the company.

The strange dew did not fall again. As a topic of conversation, it was limited, and even on the farm, where there was little new to talk about, it was forgotten in a few days. The February passed, being neither much worse nor much better than most Februaries, and ended in heavy rainstorms. March came, letting in a chilly spring over the land. The animals on the farm began to bring forth their young.

They brought them forth in amazing numbers, as if to overturn all the farmer's beliefs in the unproductiveness of his land.

"I never seen anything like it!" Grendon said to Gregory. Nor had Gregory seen the taciturn farmer so excited. He took the young man by the arm and marched him into the barn.

There lay Trix, the nannie goat. Against her flank huddled three little brown and white kids, while a fourth stood nearby, wobbling on its spindley legs.

"Four on 'em! Have you ever heard of a goat throwing off *four* kids? You better write to the papers in London about this, Gregory! But just you come down to the pigsties."

The squealing from the sties was louder than usual. As they marched down the path towards them, Gregory looked up at the great elms, their outlines dusted in green, and thought he detected something sinister in the noises, something hysterical that was perhaps matched by an element in Grendon's own bearing.

The Grendon pigs were mixed breeds, with a preponderance of Large Blacks. They usually gave litters of something like ten piglets. Now there was not a litter without fourteen in it; one enormous black sow had eighteen small pigs swarming about her. The noise was tremendous and, standing looking down on this swarming life, Gregory told himself that he was foolish to imagine anything uncanny in it; he knew so little about farm life. After he had eaten with Grendon and the men—Mrs. Grendon and Nancy had driven to town in the trap—Gregory went by himself to look about the farm, still with a deep and (he told himself) unreasoning sense of disturbance inside him.

A pale sunshine filled the afternoon. It could not penetrate far down into the water of the pond. But as Gregory stood by the horse trough staring at the expanse of water, he saw that it teemed with

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young tadpoles and frogs. He went closer. What he had regarded as a sheet of rather stagnant water was alive with small swimming things. As he looked, a great beetle surged out of the depths and seized a tadpole. The tadpoles were also providing food for two ducks that, with their young, were swimming by the reeds on the far side of the pond. And how many young did the ducks have? An armada of chicks was there, parading in and out of the rushes.

For a minute, he stood uncertainly, then began to walk slowly back the way he had come. Crossing the yard, Gregory went over to the stable and saddled Daisy. He swung himself up and rode away without bidding good-bye to anyone.

Riding into Cottersall, he went straight to the market place. He saw the Grendon trap, with Nancy's little pony, Hetty, between the shafts, standing outside the grocer's shop. Mrs. Grendon and Nancy were just coming out. Jumping to the ground, Gregory led Daisy over to them and bid them good day.

"We are going to call on my friend Mrs. Edwards and her daughters," Mrs. Grendon said.

"If you would be so kind, Mrs. Grendon, I would be very obliged if I might speak privately with Nancy. My landlady, Mrs. Fenn, has a little downstairs parlour at the back of the shop, and I know she would let us speak there. It would be quite respectable."

"Drat respectable! Let people think what they will, I say." All the same, she stood for some time in meditation. Nancy remained by her mother with her eyes on the ground. Gregory looked at her and seemed to see her anew. Under her blue coat, fur-trimmed, she wore her orange-and-brown squared gingham dress; she had a bonnet on her head. Her complexion was pure and blemishless, her skin as firm and delicate as a plum, and her dark eyes were hidden under long lashes. Her lips were steady, pale, and clearly defined, with appealing tucks at each corner. He felt almost like a thief, stealing a sight of her beauty while she was not regarding him.

"I'm going on to Mrs. Edwards," Marjorie Grendon declared at last. "I don't care what you two do so long as you behave—but I shall, mind, if you aren't with me in a half-hour, Nancy, do you hear?"

"Yes, mother."

The baker's shop was in the next street. Gregory and Nancy walked there in silence. Gregory shut Daisy in the stable and they went together into the parlour through the back door. At this time of day, Mr. Fenn was resting upstairs and his wife looking after the shop, so the little room was empty.

Nancy sat upright in a chair and said, "Well, Gregory, what's all this about? Fancy dragging me

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off from my mother like that in the middle of town!"

"Nancy, don't be cross. I had to see you."

She pouted. "You come out to the old farm often enough and don't show any particular wish to see me there."

"That's nonsense. I always come to see you—lately in particular. Besides, you're more interested in Bert Neckland, aren't you?"

"Bert Neckland, indeed! Why should I be interested in him? Not that it's any of your business if I am."

"It is my business, Nancy. I love you, Nancy!"

He had not meant to blurt it out in quite that fashion, but now it was out, it was out, and he pressed home his disadvantage by crossing the room, kneeling at her feet, and taking her hands in his. "Nancy, darling Nancy, say that you like me just a little. Encourage me somewhat."

"You are a very fine gentleman, Gregory, and I feel very kind towards you, to be sure, but . . ."

"But?"

She gave him the benefit of her downcast eyes again.

"Your station in life is very different from mine, and besides—well, you don't *do* anything."

He was shocked into silence. With the natural egotism of youth, he had not seriously thought that she could have any firm objection to him; but in her words he suddenly saw the truth of his position, at least as it was revealed to her.

"Nancy—I—well, it's true I do not seem to you to be working at present. But I do a lot of reading and studying here, and I write to several important people in the world. And all the time I am coming to a great decision about what my career will be. I do assure you I am no loafer, if that's what you think."

"No, I don't think that. But Bert says you often spend a convivial evening in that there 'Wayfarer'."

"Oh, he does, does he? And what business is it of his if I do—or of yours, come to that? What a damned cheek!"

She stood up. "If you have nothing left to say but a lot of swearing, I'll be off to join my mother, if you don't mind."

"Oh, by Jove, I'm making a mess of this!" He caught her wrist. "Listen, my sweet thing. I ask you only this, that you try and look on me favourably. And also that you let me say a word about the farm. Some strange things are happening there, and I seriously don't like to think of you being there at night. All these young things being born, all these little pigs—it's uncanny!"

"I don't see what's uncanny no more than my father does. I know how hard he works, and he's done a good job rearing his animals, that's all. He's the best farmer round Cottersall by a long chalk."

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"Oh, certainly. He's a wonderful man. But he didn't put seven or eight eggs into a hedge sparrow's nest, did he? He didn't fill the pond with tadpoles and newts till it looks like a broth, did he? Something strange is happening on your farm this year, Nancy, and I want to protect you if I can."

The earnestness with which he spoke, coupled perhaps with his proximity and the ardent way he pressed her hand, went a good way toward mollifying Nancy.

"Dear Gregory, you don't know anything about farm life, I don't reckon, for all your books. But you're very sweet to be concerned."

"I shall always be concerned about you, Nancy, you beautiful creature."

"You'll make me blush!"

"Please do, for then you look even lovelier than usual!" He put an arm round her. When she looked up at him, he caught her up close to his chest and kissed her fervently.

She gasped and broke away, but not with too great haste.

"Oh, Gregory! Oh, Gregory! I must go to mother now!"

"Another kiss first! I can't let you go until I get another."

He took it, and stood by the door trembling with excitement as she left. "Come and see us again soon," she whispered.

"With dearest pleasure," he said. But the next visit held more dread than pleasure.

The big cart was standing in the yard full of squealing piglets when Gregory arrived. The farmer and Neckland were bustling about it. The former greeted Gregory cheerfully.

"I've a chance to make a good quick profit on these little chaps. Old sows can't feed them, but sucking pig fetches its price in Norwich, so Bert and me are going to drive over to Heigham and put them on the train."

"They've grown since I last saw them!"

"Ah, they put on over two pounds a day. Bert, we'd better get a net and spread over this lot, or thev'll be diving out. They're that lively!"

The two men made their way over to the barn, clomping through the mud. Mud squelched behind Gregory. He turned.

In the muck between the stables and the cart, footprints appeared, two parallel tracks. They seemed to imprint themselves with no agency but their own. A cold flow of acute supernatural terror overcame Gregory, so that he could not move. The scene seemed to go grey and palsied as he watched the tracks come towards him.

The carthorse neighed uneasily, the prints reached the cart, the cart creaked, as if something had climbed abroad. The piglets squealed with terror. One dived clear over the wooden sides. Then a terrible silence fell.

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Gregory still could not move. He heard an unaccountable sucking noise in the cart, but his eyes remained rooted on the muddy tracks. Those impressions were of something other than a man: something with dragging feet that were in outline something like a seal's flippers. Suddenly he found his voice, "*Mr Grendon!*" he cried.

Only as the farmer and Bert came running from the barn with the net did Gregory dare look into the cart.

One last piglet, even as he looked, seemed to be deflating rapidly, like a rubber ballon collapsing. It went limp and lay silent among the other little empty bags of pig skin. The cart creaked. Something splashed heavily off across the farm yard in the direction of the pond.

Grendon did not see. He had run to the cart and was staring like Gregory in dismay at the deflated corpses. Neckland stared too, and was the first to find his voice.

"Some sort of disease got 'em all, just like that! Must be one of them there new diseases from the Continent of Europe!"

"It's no disease," Gregory said. He could hardly speak, for his mind had just registered the fact that there were no bones left in or amid the deflated pig bodies. "It's no disease—look, the pig that got away is still alive."

He pointed to the animal that had jumped from the cart. It had injured its leg in the process, and now lay in the ditch some feet away, panting. The farmer went over to it and lifted it out.

"It escaped the disease by jumping out," Neckland said. "Master, we better go and see how the rest of them is down in the sties."

"Ah, that we had," Grendon said. He handed the pig over to Gregory, his face set. "No good taking one alone to market. I'll get Grubby to unharness the horse. Meanwhile, perhaps you'd be good enough to take this little chap in to Marjorie. At least we can all eat a bit of roast pig for dinner tomorrow."

"Mr Grendon, this is no disease. Have the veterinarian over from Heigham and let him examine these bodies."

"Don't you tell me how to run my farm, young man. I've got trouble enough."

Despite this rebuff, Gregory could not keep away. He had to see Nancy, and he had to see what occurred at the farm. The morning after the horrible thing happened to the pigs, he received a letter from his most admired correspondent, Mr. H. G. Wells, one paragraph of which read: "At bottom, I think I am neither optimist nor pessimist. I tend to believe both that we stand on the threshold of an epoch of magnificent progress —certainly such an epoch is within our grasp—and that we may

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have reached the 'fin du globe' prophesied by our gloomier fin de siecle prophets. I am not at all surprised to hear that such a vast issue may be resolving itself on a remote farm near Cottersall, Norfolk—all unknown to anyone but the two of us. Do not think that I am in other than a state of terror, even when I cannot help exclaiming 'What a lark!' "

Too preoccupied to be as excited over such a letter as he would ordinarily have been, Gregory tucked it away in his jacket pocket and went to saddle up Daisy.

Before lunch, he stole a kiss from Nancy, and planted another on her over-heated left cheek as she stood by the vast range in the kitchen. Apart from that, there was little pleasure in the day. Grendon was reassured to find that none of the other piglets had fallen ill of the strange shrinking disease, but he remained alert against the possibility of it striking again. Meanwhile, another miracle had occurred. In the lower pasture, in a tumbledown shed, he had a cow that had given birth to four calves during the night. He did not expect the animal to live, but the calves were well enough, and being fed from a bottle by Nancy.

The farmer's face was dull, for he had been up all night with the labouring cow, and he sat down thankfully at the head of the table as the roast pig arrived on its platter.

It proved uneatable. In no time, they were all flinging down their implements in disgust. The flesh had a bitter taste for which Neckland was the first to account.

"It's diseased!" he growled. "This here animal had the disease all the time. We didn't ought to eat this here meat or we may all be dead ourselves inside of a week."

They were forced to make a snack on cold salted beef and cheese and pickled onions, none of which Mrs. Grendon could face in her condition. She retreated upstairs in tears at the thought of the failure of her carefully prepared dish, and Nancy ran after her to comfort her.

After the dismal meal, Gregory spoke to Grendon.

"I have decided I must go to Norwich tomorrow for a few days, Mr. Grendon," he said. "You are in trouble here, I believe. Is there anything, any business, I can transact for you in the city? Can I find you a vetinary surgeon there?"

Grendon clapped his shoulder. "I know you mean well, and I thank 'ee for it, but you don't seem to realise that vetinaries cost a load of money and aren't always too helpful when they do come."

"Then let me do something for you, Joseph, in return for all your kindness to me. Let me bring a vet back from Norwich at my own expense, just to have a look round, nothing more."

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"Blow me if you aren't stubborn as they come. I'm telling you, same as my dad used to say, if I finds any person on my land as I didn't ask here, I'm getting that there rifle of mine down and I'm peppering him with buckshot, same as I did with them two old tramps last year. Fair enough?"

"I suppose so."

"Then I must go and see to the cow. And stop worrying about what you don't understand."

The visit to Norwich (an uncle had a house in that city) took up the better part of Gregory's next week. Consequently, apprehension stirred in him when he again approached the Grendon farm along the rough road from Cottersall. He was surprised to see how the countryside had altered since he was last this way. New foliage gleamed everywhere, and even the heath looked a happier place. But as he came up to the farm, he saw how overgrown it was. Great ragged elder and towering cow parsley had shot up, so that at first they hid all the buildings. He fancied the farm had been spirited away until, spurring Daisy on, he saw the black mill emerge from behind a clump of nearby growth. The south meadows were deep in rank grass. Even the elms seemed much shaggier than before and loomed threateningly over the house.

As he clattered over the flat wooden bridge and through the open gate into the yard, Gregory noted huge hairy nettles craning out of the adjoining ditches. Birds fluttered everywhere. Yet the impression he received was one of death rather than life. A great quiet lay over the place, as if it were under a curse that eliminated noise and hope.

He realised this effect was partly because Lardie, the young bitch collie who had taken the place of Cuff, was not running up barking as she generally did with visitors. The yard was deserted. Even the customary fowls had gone. As he led Daisy into the stables, he saw a heavy piebald in the first stall and recognised it as Dr. Crouchorn's. His anxieties took more definite shape.

Since the stable was now full, he led his mare across to the stone trough by the pond and hitched her there before walking over to the house. The front door was open. Great ragged dandelions grew against the porch. The creeper, hitherto somewhat sparse, pressed into the lower windows. A movement in the rank grass caught his eye and he looked down, drawing back his riding boot. An enormous toad crouched under weed, the head of a still writhing grass snake in its mouth. The toad seemed to eye Gregory fixedly, as if trying to determine whether the man envied it its gluttony. Shuddering in disgust, he hurried into the house.

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Muffled sounds came from upstairs. The stairs curled round the massive chimneypiece, and were shut from the lower rooms by a latched door. Gregory had never been invited upstairs, but he did not hesitate. Throwing the door open, he started up the dark stairwell, and almost at once ran into a body.

Its softness told him that this was Nancy; she stood in the dark weeping. Even as he caught her and breathed her name, she broke from his grasp and ran from him up the stairs. He could hear the noises more clearly now, and the sound of crying—though at the moment he was not listening. Nancy ran to a door on the landing nearest to the top of the stairs, burst into the room beyond, and closed it. When Gregory tried the latch, he heard the bolt slide to on the other side.

"Nancy!" he called. "Don't hide from me! What is it? What's happening?"

She made no answer. As he stood there baffled against the door, the next door along the passage opened and Doctor Crouchorn emerged, clutching his little black bag. He was a tall, sombre man, with deep lines on his face that inspired such fear into his patients that a remarkable percentage of them did as he bid and recovered. Even here, he wore the top hat that, simply by remaining constantly in position, contributed to the doctor's fame in the neighbourhood.

"What's the trouble, Doctor Crouchorn?" Gregory asked, as the medical man shut the door behind him and started down the stairs. "Has the plague struck this house, or something equally terrible?"

"Plague, young man, plague? No, it is something much more unnatural than that."

He stared at Gregory unsmilingly, as if promising himself inwardly not to move a muscle again until Gregory asked the obvious.

"What did you call for, doctor?"

"The hour of Mrs Grendon's confinement struck during the night," he said.

A wave of relief swept over Gregory. He had forgotten Nancy's mother! "She's had her baby? Was it a boy?"

The doctor nodded in slow motion. "She bore two boys, young man." He hesitated, and then a muscle in his face twitched and he said in a rush, "She also bore seven daughters. Nine children! And they all—they all live."

Gregory found Grendon round the corner of the house. The farmer had a pitchfork full of hay, which he was carrying over his shoulder into the cow sheds. Gregory stood in his way but he pushed past.

"I want to speak to you, Joseph."

"There's work to be done. Pity you can't see that."

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"I want to speak about your wife."

Grendon made no reply. He worked like a demon, tossing the hay down, turning for more. In any case, it was difficult to talk. The cows and calves, closely confined, seemed to set up a perpetual uneasy noise of lowing and uncow-like grunts. Gregory followed the farmer round to the hayrick, but the man walked like one possessed. His eyes seemed sunk into his head, his mouth was puckered until his lips were invisible. When Gregory laid a hand on his arm, he shook it off. Stabbing up another great load of hay, he swung back towards the sheds so violently that Gregory had to jump out of his way.

Gregory lost his temper. Following Grendon back into the cowshed, he swung the bottom of the two-part door shut, and bolted it on the outside. When Grendon came back, he did not budge.

"Joseph, what's got into you? Why are you suddenly so heartless? Surely your wife needs you by her?"

His eyes had a curious blind look as he turned them at Gregory. He held the pitchfork before him in both hands almost like a weapon as he said, "I been with her all night, bor, while she brought forth her increase."

"But now—"

"She got a nursing woman from Dereham Cottages with her now. I been with her all night. Now I got to see to the farm—things keep growing, you know."

"They're growing too much, Joseph. Stop and think—"

"I've no time for talking." Dropping the pitchfork, he elbowed Gregory out of the way, unbolted the door, and flung it open. Grasping Gregory firmly by the biceps of one arm, he began to propel him along to the vegetable beds down by South Meadows.

The early lettuce were gigantic here. Everything bristled out of the ground. Recklessly, Grendon ran among the lines of new green, pulling up fists full of young radish, carrots, spring onions, scattering them over his shoulder as fast as he plucked them from the ground.

"See, Gregory—all bigger than you ever seen 'em, and weeks early! The harvest is going to be a bumper. Look at the fields! Look at the orchard!" With wide gesture, he swept a hand towards the lines of trees, buried in the mounds of snow-and-pink of their blossom. "Whatever happens, we got to take advantage of it. It may not happen another year. Why—it's like a fairy story!"

He said no more. Turning, he seemed already to have forgotten Gregory. Eyes down at the ground that had suddenly achieved such abundance, he marched back towards the sheds.

Nancy was in the kitchen.

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Neckland had brought her in a stoup of fresh milk, and she was supping it wearily from a ladle.

"Oh, Greg, I'm sorry I ran from you. I was so upset." She came to him, still holding the ladle but dangling her arms over his shoulders in a familiar way she had not used before. "Poor mother, I fear her mind is unhinged with—with bearing so many children. She's talking such strange stuff as I never heard before, and I do believe she fancies as she's a child again."

"Is it to be wondered at?" he said, smoothing her hair with his hand. "She'll be better once she's recovered from the shock."

They kissed each other, and after a minute she passed him a ladleful of milk. He drank and then spat it out in disgust.

"Ugh! What's got into the milk? Is Neckland trying to poison you or something? Have you tasted it? It's as bitter as sloes!"

She pulled a puzzled face. "I thought it tasted rather strange, but not unpleasant. Here, let me try again."

"No, it's too horrible. Some Sloane's Liniment must have got mixed in it."

Despite his warning, she put her lips to the metal spoon and sipped, then shook her head. "You're imagining things, Greg. It does taste a bit different, 'tis true, but there's nothing wrong with it. You'll stay to take a bite with us, I hope?"

"No, Nancy, I'm off now. I have a letter awaiting me that I must answer; it arrived when I was in Norwich. Listen, my lovely Nancy, this letter is from a Dr. Hudson-Ward, an old acquaintance of my father's. He is headmaster of a school in Gloucester, and he wishes me to join the staff there as teacher on most favourable terms. So you see I may not be idle much longer!"

Laughing, she clung to him. "That's wonderful, my darling! What a handsome schoolmaster you will make. But Gloucester—that's over the other side of the country. I suppose we shan't be seeing you again once you get there."

"Nothing's settled yet, Nancy."

"You'll be gone in a week and we shan't never see you again. Once you get to that there old school, you will never think of your Nancy no more."

He cupped her face in his hands. "Are you my Nancy? Do you care for me?"

Her eyelashes came over her dark eyes. "Greg, things are so muddled here—I mean—yes, I do care, I dread to think I'd not see you again."

Recalling her saying that, he rode away a quarter of an hour later very content at heart—and entirely neglectful of the dangers to which he left her exposed.

Rain fell lightly as Gregory

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Rolles made his way that evening to the 'Wayfarer' inn. His friend Bruce Fox was already there, ensconced in one of the snug seats by the ingle nook.

On this occasion, Fox was more interested in purveying details of his sister's forthcoming wedding than in listening to what Gregory had to tell, and since some of his future brother-in-law's friends soon arrived, and had to buy and be bought libations, the evening became a merry and thoughtless one. And in a short while, the ale having its good effect, Gregory also forgot what he wanted to say and began whole-heartedly to enjoy the company.

Next morning, he awoke with a heavy head and in a dismal state of mind. The day was too wet for him to go out and take exercise. He sat moodily in a chair by the window, delaying an answer to Dr. Hudson-Ward, the headmaster. Lethargically, he returned to a small leather-bound volume on serpents that he had acquired in Norwich a few days earlier. After a while, a passage caught his particular attention:

"Most serpents of the venomous variety, with the exception of the opisthoglyphs, release their victims from their fangs after striking. The victims die in some cases in but a few seconds, while in other cases the onset of moribundity may be delayed by hours or days. The saliva of some serpents contains not only venom but a special digestive virtue. The deadly Coral Snake of Brazil, though attaining no more than a foot in length, has this virtue in abundance. Accordingly, when it bites an animal or a human being, the victim not only dies in profound agony in a matter of seconds, but his interior parts are then dissolved, so that even the bones become no more than jelly. Then may the little serpent suck all of the victim out as a kind of soup or broth from the original wound in its skin, which latter alone remains intact."

For a long while, Gregory sat where he was in the window, with the book open in his lap, thinking about the Grendon farm, and about Nancy. He reproached himself for having done so little for his friends there, and gradually resolved on a plan of action the next time he rode out; but his visit was to be delayed for some days: the wet weather had set in with more determination than the end of April and the beginning of May generally allowed.

Gregory tried to concentrate on a letter to the worthy Dr. Hudson-Ward in the county of Gloucestershire. He knew he should take the job, indeed he felt inclined to do so; but first he knew he had to see Nancy safe. The indecisions he felt caused him to delay answering the doctor until the next day, when he feebly wrote that he

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would be glad to accept the post offered at the price offered, but begged to have a week to think about it. When he took the letter down to the post woman in 'The Three Poachers', the rain still fell.

One morning, the rains were suddenly vanished, the blue and wide East Anglian skies were back, and Gregory saddled up Daisy and rode out along the mirey track he had so often taken. As he arrived at the farm, Grubby and Neckland were at work in the ditch, unblocking it with shovels. He saluted them and rode in. As he was about to put the mare into the stables, he saw Grendon and Nancy standing on the patch of waste ground under the windowless east side of the house. He went slowly to join them, noting as he walked how dry the ground was here, as if no rain had fallen in a fortnight. But this observation was drowned in shock as he saw the nine little crosses Grendon was sticking into nine freshly-turned mounds of earth.

Nancy stood weeping. They both looked up as Gregory approached, but Grendon went stubbornly on with his task.

"Oh, Nancy, Joseph, I'm so sorry about this!" Gregory exclaimed. "To think that they've all—but where's the parson? Where's the parson, Joseph? Why are *you* burying them, without a proper service or anything?"

"I told father, but he took no heed!" Nancy exclaimed.

Grendon had reached the last grave. He seized the last crude wooden cross, lifted it above his head and stabbed it down into the ground as if he would pierce the heart of what lay under it. Only then did he straighten and speak.

"We don't need a parson here. I've no time to waste with parsons. I have work to do if you ent."

"But these are your children, Joseph! What has got into you?"

"They are part of the farm now, as they always was." He turned, rolling his shirt sleeves further up his brawny arms, and stroke off in the direction of the ditching activities.

Gregory took Nancy in his arms and looked at her tear-stained face. "What a time you must have been having these last few days!"

"I—I thought you'd gone to Gloucester, Greg! Why didn't you come? Every day I waited for you to come!"

"It was so wet and flooded."

"It's been lovely weather since you were last here. Look how everything has grown!"

"It poured with rain every single day in Cottersall."

"Well, I never! That explains why there is so much water flowing in the Oast and in the ditches. But we've had only a few light showers."

"Nancy, tell me, how did these poor little mites die?"

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"I'd rather not say, if you don't mind."

"Why didn't your father get in Parson Landon? How could he be so lacking in feeling?"

"Because he didn't want anyone from the outside world to know. You see—oh, I must tell you, my dear—it's mother. She has gone completely off her head, completely! It was the evening before last, when she took her first turn outside the back door."

"You don't mean to say she—"

"Ow, Greg, you're hurting my arms! She—she crept upstairs when we weren't noticing and she—she stifled each of the babies in turn, Greg, under the best goose feather pillow."

He could feel the colour leaving his cheeks. Solicitously, she led him to the back of the house. They sat together on the orchard railings while he digested the words in silence.

"How is your mother now, Nancy?"

"She's silent. Father had to bar her in her room for safety. Last night she screamed a lot. But this morning she's quiet."

He looked dazedly about him. The appearance of everything was speckled, as if the return of his blood to his head had somehow infected it with a rash. The blossom had gone almost entirely from the fruit trees in the orchard and already the embryo apples showed signs of swelling. Nearby, broad beans bowed under enormous pods. Seeing his glance, Nancy dipped into her apron pocket and produced a bunch of shining crimson radishes as big as tangerines.

"Have one of these. They're crisp and wet and hot, just as they should be."

Indifferently, he accepted and bit the temping globe. At once he had to spit the portion out. There again was that vile bitter flavour!

"Oh, but they're lovely!" Nancy protested.

"Not even 'rather strange' now—simply 'lovely'? Nancy, don't you see, something uncanny and awful is taking place here. I'm sorry, but I can't see otherwise. You and your father should leave here at once."

"*Leave* here, Greg? Just because you don't like the taste of these lovely radishes? How can we leave here? Where should we go? See this here house? My granddad died here, and his father before him. It's our *place*. We can't just up and off, not even after this bit of trouble. Try another radish."

"For heaven's sake, Nancy, they taste is if the flavour was intended for creatures with a palate completely different from ours . . . Oh. . . ." He stared at her. "And perhaps they are. Nancy, I tell you—"

He broke off, sliding from the railing. Neckland had come up from one side, still plastered in mud from his work in the ditch,

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his collarless shirt flapping open. In his hand, he grasped an ancient and military-looking pistol.

"I'll fire this if you come nearer," he said. "It goes okey, never worry, and it's loaded, Master Gregory. Now you're a-going to listen to me!"

"Bert, put that thing away!" Nancy exclaimed. She moved forward to him, but Gregory pulled her back and stood before her.

"Don't be a bloody idiot, Neckland. Put it away!"

"I'll shoot you, bor, I'll shoot you, I swear, if you mucks about." His eyes were glaring, and the look on his dark face left no doubt that he meant what he said. "You're going to swear to me that you're going to clear off of this farm on that nag of yours and never come back again."

"I'm going straight to tell my father, Bert," Nancy warned.

The pistol twitched.

"If you move, Nancy, I warn you I'll shoot this fine chap of yours in the leg. Besides, your father don't care about Master Gregory any more—he's got better things to worry him."

"Like finding out what's happening here?" Gregory said. "Listen, Neckland, we're all in trouble. This farm is being run by a group of nasty little monsters. You can't see them because they're invisible—"

The gun exploded. As he spoke, Nancy had attempted to run off. Without hesitating, Neckland fired down at Gregory's knees. Gregory felt the shot pluck his trouser leg and knew himself unharmed. With knowledge came rage. He flung himself at Neckland and hit him hard over the heart. Falling back, Neckland dropped the pistol and swung his fist wildly. Gregory struck him again. As he did so, the other grabbed him and they began furiously hitting each other. When Gregory broke free, Neckland grappled with him again. There was more pummeling of ribs.

"Let me go, you swine!" Gregory shouted. He hooked his foot behind Neckland's ankle, and they both rolled over onto the grass. At this point, a sort of flood bank had been raised long ago between the house and the low-lying orchard. Down this the two men rolled, fetching up sharply against the stone wall of the kitchen. Neckland got the worst of it, catching his head on the corner, and lay there stunned. Gregory found himself looking at two feet encased in ludicrous stockings. Slowly, he rose to his feet, and confronted Mrs. Grendon at less than a yard's distance. She was smiling.

He stood there, and gradually straightened his back, looking at her anxiously.

"So there you are, Jackie, my Jackalums," she said. The smile was wider now and less like a

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smile. "I wanted to talk to you. You are the one who knows about the things that walk on the lines, aren't you?"

"I don't understand, Mr. Grendon."

"Don't call me that there daft old name, sonnie. You know all about the little grey things that aren't supposed to be there, don't you?"

"Oh, those. . . . Suppose I said I did know?"

"The other naughty children will pretend they don't know what I mean, but you know, don't you? You know about the little grey things."

The sweat stood out on his brow. She had moved nearer. She stood close, staring into his eyes, not touching him; but he was acutely conscious that she could touch him at any moment. From the corner of his eye, he saw Neckland stir and crawl away from the house, but there were other things to occupy him.

"These little grey things," he said. "Did you save the nine babies from them?"

"The grey things wanted to kiss them, you see, but I couldn't let them. I was clever. I hid them under the good feather pillow and now even *I* can't find them!" She began to laugh, making a horrible low whirring sound in her throat.

"They're small and grey and wet, aren't they?" Gregory said sharply. "They've got big feet, webbed like frogs, but they're heavy and short, aren't they, and they have fangs like a snake, haven't they?"

She looked doubtful. Then her eye seemed to catch a movement. She looked fixedly to one side. "Here comes one now, the female one," she said.

Gregory turned to look where she did. Nothing was visible. His mouth was dry. "How many are there, Mrs. Grendon?"

Then he saw the short grass stir, flatten, and raise near at hand, and let out a cry of alarm. Wrenching off his riding boot, he swung it in an arc, low above the ground. It struck something concealed in thin air. Almost at once, he received a terrific kick in the thigh, and fell backwards. Despite the hurt, fear made him jump up almost at once.

Mrs. Grendon was changing. Her mouth collapsed as if it would run off one corner of her face. Her head sagged to one side. Her shoulders fell. A deep crimson blush momentarily suffused her features, then drained, and as it drained she dwindled like a deflating rubber balloon. Gregory sank to his knees, whimpering, buried his face in his hands and pressed his hands to the grass. Darkness overcame him.

His senses must have left him only for a moment. When he pulled himself up again, the almost empty bag of women's clothes

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was still settling slowly to the ground.

"Joseph! Joseph!" he yelled. Nancy had fled. In a distracted mixture of panic and fury, he dragged his boot on again and rushed round the house towards the cowsheds.

Neckland stood half way between barn and mill, rubbing his skull. In his rattled state, the sight of Gregory apparently in full pursuit made him run away.

"Neckland!" Gregory shouted. He ran like mad for the other. Neckland bolted for the mill, jumped inside, tried to pull the door to, lost his nerve, and ran up the wooden stairs. Gregory bellowed after him.

The pursuit took them right up to the top of the mill. Neckland had lost enough wit even to kick over the bolt of the trapdoor. Gregory burst it up and climbed out panting. Thoroughly cowed, Neckland backed towards the opening until he was almost out on the little platform above the sails.

"You'll fall out, you idiot," Gregory warned. "Listen, Neckland, you have no reason to fear me. I want no enmity between us. There's a bigger enemy we must fight. Look!"

He came towards the low door and looked down at the dark surface of the pond. Neckland grabbed the overhead pulley for security and said nothing.

"Look down at the pond," Gregory said. "That's where the Aurigans live. My God—Bert, look, there one goes!"

The urgency in his voice made the farm hand look down where he pointed. Together, the two men watched as a depression slid over the black water; an overlapping chain of ripples swung back from it. At approximately the middle of the pond, the depression became a commotion. A small whirlpool formed and died, and the ripples began to settle.

"There's your ghost, Bert," Gregory gasped. "That must have been the one that got poor Mrs. Grendon. Now do you believe?"

"I never heard of a ghost as lived under water," Neckland gasped.

"A ghost never harmed anyone—we've already had a sample of what these terrifying things can do. Come on, Bert, shake hands, understand I bear you no hard feelings. Oh, come on, man! I know how you feel about Nancy, but she must be free to make her own choice in life."

They shook hands and grinned rather foolishly at each other.

"We better go and tell the farmer what we seen," Neckland said. "I reckon that thing done what happened to Lardie last evening."

"Lardie? What's happened to her? I thought I hadn't seen her today."

"Same as happened to the little

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pigs. I found her just inside the barn. Just her coat was left, that's all. No insides! Like she'd been sucked dry."

It took Gregory twenty minutes to summon the council of war on which he had set his mind. The party gathered in the farmhouse, in the parlour. By this time, Nancy had somewhat recovered from the shock of her mother's death, and sat in an armchair with a shawl about her shoulders. Her father stood nearby with his arms folded, looking impatient, while Bert Neckland lounged by the door. Only Grubby was not present. He had been told to get on with the ditching.

"I'm going to have another attempt to convince you all that you are in very grave danger," Gregory said. "You won't see it for yourselves. The situation is that we're all animals together at present. Do you remember that strange meteor that fell out of the sky last winter, Joseph? And do you remember that ill-smelling dew early in the spring? They were not unconnected, and they are connected with all that's happening now. That meteor was a space machine of some sort, I firmly believe, and it brought in it a kind of life that—that is not so much hostile to terrestrial life as *indifferent to its quality*. The creatures from that machine—I call them Aurigans—spread the dew over the farm. It was a growth accelerator, a manure or fertilizer, that speeds growth in plants and animals."

"So much better for us!" Grendon said.

"But it's not better. The things grow wildly, yes, but the taste is altered to suit the palates of those things out there. You've seen what happened. You can't sell anything. People won't touch your eggs or milk or meat—they taste too foul."

"But that's a lot of nonsense. We'll sell in Norwich. Our produce is better than it ever was. We eat it, don't we?"

"Yes, Joseph, *you* eat it. But anyone who eats at your table is doomed. Don't you understand—you are all 'fertilized' just as surely as the pigs and chickens. Your place has been turned into a superfarm, and you are all meat to the Aurigans."

That set a silence in the room, until Nancy said in a small voice, "You don't believe such a terrible thing."

"I suppose these unseen creatures told you all this?" Grendon said truculently.

"Judge by the evidence, as I do. Your wife—I must be brutal, Joseph—your wife was eaten, like the dog and the pigs. As everything else will be in time. The Aurigans aren't even cannibals. They aren't like us. They don't care whether we have souls or in-

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telligences, any more than we really care whether the bullocks have."

"No one's going to eat me," Neckland said, looking decidedly white about the gills.

"How can you stop them? They're invisible, and I think they can strike like snakes. They're aquatic and I think they may be only two feet tall. How can you protect yourself?" He turned to the farmer. "Joseph, the danger is very great, and not only to us here. At first, they may have offered us no harm while they got the measure of us—otherwise I'd have died in your rowing boat. Now there's no longer doubt of their hostile intent. I beg you to let me go to Heigham and telephone to the chief of police in Norwich, or at least to the local militia, to get them to come and help us."

The farmer shook his head slowly, and pointed a finger at Gregory.

"You soon forgot them talks we had, bor, all about the coming age of socialism and how the powers of the state was going to wither away. Directly we get a bit of trouble, you want to call in the authorities. There's no harm here a few savage dogs like my old Cuff can't handle, and I don't say as I ent going to get a couple of dogs, but you'm a fule if you reckon I'm getting the authorities down here. Fine old socialist you turn out to be!"

"You have no room to talk about that!" Gregory exclaimed. "Why didn't you let Grubby come here? If you were a socialist, you'd treat the men as you treat yourself. Instead, you leave him out in the ditch. I wanted him to hear this discussion."

The farmer leant threateningly across the table at him.

"Oh, you did, did you? Since when was this your farm? And Grubby can come and go as he likes when it's his, so put that in your pipe and smoke it, bor! Who do you just think you are?" He moved closer to Gregory, apparently happy to work off his fears as anger. "You're trying to scare us all off this here little old bit of ground, ent you? Well, the Grendons ent a scaring sort, see! Now I'll tell you something. See that rifle there on the wall? That be loaded. And if you ent off this farm by midday, that rifle ont be on that wall no more. It'll be here, bor, right here in my two hands, and I'll be letting you have it right where you'll feel it most."

"You can't do that, father," Nancy said. "You know Gregory is a friend of ours."

"For God's sake, Joseph," Gregory said, "see where your enemy lies. Bert, tell Mr. Grendon what we saw on the pond, go on!"

Neckland was far from keen to be dragged into this argument. He scratched his head, drew a red-and-white spotted kerchief from round his neck to wipe his face,

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and muttered, "We saw a sort of ripple on the water, but I didn't see nothing really, Master Gregory. I mean, it could have been the wind, could't it?"

"Now you be warned, Gregory," the farmer repeated. "You be off my land by noon by the sun, and that mare of yours, or I ont answer for it." He marched out into the pale sunshine, and Neckland followed.

Nancy and Gregory stood staring at each other. He took her hands, and they were cold.

"You believe what I was saying, Nancy?"

"Is that why the food did at one point taste bad to us, and then soon tasted well enough again?"

"It can only have been that at that time your systems were not fully adjusted to the poison. Now they are. You're being fed up, Nancy, just like the livestock—I'm sure of it! I fear for you, darling love, I fear so much. What are we to do? Come back to Cottersall with me! Mrs. Fenn has another fine little drawing room upstairs that I'm sure she would rent."

"Now you're talking nonsense, Greg! How can I? What would people say? No, you go away for now and let the tempest of father's wrath abate, and if you could come back tomorrow, you will find he will be milder for sure, because I plan to wait on him tonight and talk to him about you. Why he's half daft with grief and doesn't know what he says."

"All right, my darling. But stay inside as much as you can. The Aurigans have not come indoors yet, as far as we know, and it may be safer here. And lock all the doors and put the shutters over the windows before you go to bed. And get your father to take that rifle of his upstairs with him."

The evenings were lengthening with confidence towards summer now, and Bruce Fox arrived home before sunset. As he jumped from his bicycle this evening, he found his friend Gregory impatiently awaiting him.

They went indoors together, and while Fox ate a large tea, Gregory told him what had been happening at the farm that day.

"You're in trouble," Fox said. "Look, tomorrow's Sunday. I'll skip church and come out with you. You need help."

"Joseph may shoot me. He'll be certain to if I bring along a stranger. You can help me tonight by telling me where I can purchase a young dog straight away to protect Nancy."

"Nonsense, I'm coming with you. I can't bear hearing all this at second hand anyhow. We'll pick up a pup in any event—the blacksmith has a litter to be rid of. Have you got any plan of action?"

"Plan? No, not really."

"You must have a plan. Gren-

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don doesn't scare too easily, does he?"

"I imagine he's scared well enough. Nancy says he's scared. He just isn't imaginative enough to see what he can do but carry on working as hard as possible."

"Look, I know these farmers. They won't believe anything till you rub their noses in it. What we must do is *show* him an Aurigan."

"Oh, splenlid, Bruce? And how do you catch one?"

"You trap one."

"Don't forget they're invisible—hey, Bruce, yes, by Jove, you're right! I've the very idea! Look, we've nothing more to worry about if we can trap one. We can trap the lot, however many there are, and we can kill the little horrors when we have trapped them."

Fox grinned over the top of a chunk of cherry cake. "We're agreed, I suppose, that these Aurigans aren't socialist utopians any longer?"

It helped a great deal, Gregory thought, to be able to visualize roughly what the alien life form looked like. The volume on serpents had been a happy find, for not only did it give an idea of how the Aurigans must be able to digest their prey so rapidly—"a kind of soup or broth"—but presumably it gave a clue to their appearance. To live in a space machine, they would probably be fairly small, and they seemed to be semi-aquatic. It all went to make up a picture of a strange being: skin perhaps scaled like a fish, great flipper feet like a frog, barrel-like diminutive stature, and a tiny head with two great fangs in the jaw. There was no doubt but that the invisiability cloaked a really ugly-looking dwarf!

As the macabre image passed through his head, Gregory and Bruce Fox were preparing their trap. Fortunately, Grendon had offered no resistance to their entering the farm; Nancy had evidently spoken to good effect. And he had suffered another shock. Five fowls had been reduced to little but feathers and skin that morning almost before his eyes, and he was as a result sullen and indifferent of what went on. Now he was out in a distant field, working, and the two young men were allowed to carry out their plans unmolested—though not without an occasional anxious glance at the pond—while a worried Nancy looked on from the farmhouse window.

She had with her a sturdy young mongrel dog of eight months, which Gregory and Bruce had brought along, called Gyp. Grendon had obtained two ferocious hounds from a distant neighbour. These wide-mouthed brutes were secured on long running chains that enabled them to patrol from the horse trough by the pond, down the west side of the house,

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almost to the elms and the bridge leading over to West Field. They barked stidently most of the time and seemed to cause a general unease among the other animals, all of which gave voice restlessly this forenoon.

The dogs would be a difficulty, Nancy had said, for they refused to touch any of the food the farm could provide. It was hoped they would take it when they became hungry enough.

Grendon had planted a great board by the farm gate and on the board had painted a notice telling everyone to keep away.

Armed with pitchforks, the two young men carried flour sacks out from the mill and placed them at strategic positions across the yard as far as the gate. Gregory went to the cowsheds and led out one of the calves there on a length of binder twine under the very teeth of the barking dogs—he only hoped they would prove as hostile to the Aurigans as they seemed to be to human life.

As he was pulling the calf across the yard, Grubby appeared.

"You'd better stay away from us, Grubby. We're trying to trap one of the ghosts."

"Master if I catch one, I shall strangle him, straight I will."

"A pitchfork is a better weapon. These ghosts are dangerous little beasts at close quarters."

"I'm strong, bor, I tell 'ee! I'd strangle un!"

To prove his point, Grubby rolled his striped and tattered sleeve even further up his arm and exposed to Gregory and Fox his enormous biceps. At the same time, he wagged his great heavy head and lolled his tongue out of his mouth, perhaps to demonstrate some of the effects of strangulation.

"It's a very fine arm," Gregory agreed. "But, look, Grubby, we have a better idea. We are going to do this ghost to death with pitchforks. If you want to join in, you'd better get a spare one from the stable."

Grubby looked at him with a sly-shy expression and stroked his throat. "I'd be better at strangling, bor. I've always wanted to strangle someone."

"Why should you want to do that, Grubby?"

The labourer lowered his voice. "I always wanted to see how difficult it would be. I'm strong, you see. I got my strength up as a lad by doing some of this here strangling—but never men, you know, just cattle."

Backing away a pace, Gregory said, "This time, Grubby, it's pitchforks for us." To settle the issue, he went into the stables, got a pitchfork, and returned to thrust it into Grubby's hand.

"Let's get on with it," Fox said.

They were all ready to start. Fox and Grubby crouched down in the ditch on either side of the

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gate, weapons at the ready. Gregory emptied one of the bags of flour over the yard in a patch just before the gate, so that anyone leaving the farm would have to walk through it. Then he led the calf towards the pond.

The young animal set up an uneasy mooing, and most of the beasts nearby seemed to answer. The chickens and hens scattered about the yard in the pale sunshine as if demented. Gregory felt the sweat trickle down his back, although his skin was cold with the chemistries of suspense. With a slap on its rump, he forced the calf into the water of the pond. It stood there unhappily, until he led it out again and slowly back across the yard, past the mill and the grain store on his right, past Mrs. Grendon's neglected flowerbed on his left, towards the gate where his allies waited. And for all his determination not to do so, he could not stop himself looking backwards at the leaden surface of the pond to see if anything followed him. He led the calf through the gate and stopped. No tracks but his and the calf's showed in the strewn flour.

"Try it again," Fox advised. "Perhaps they are taking a nap down there."

Gregory went through the routine again, and a third and fourth time, on each occasion smoothing the flour after he had been through it. Each time, he saw Nancy watching helplessly from the house. Each time, he felt a little more sick with tension.

Yet when it happened, it took him by surprise. He had got the calf to the gate for a fifth time when Fox's shout joined the chorus of animal noises. The pond had shown no special ripple, so the Aurigan had come from some dark-purposed prowl of the farm —suddenly, its finned footsteps were marking the flour.

Yelling with excitement, Gregory dropped the rope that led the calf and ducked to one side. Seizing up an opened bag of flour by the gatepost, he flung its contents before the advancing figure.

The bomb of flour exploded all over the Aurigan. Now it was revealed in chalky outline. Despite himself, Gregory found himself screaming in sheer fright as the ghastliness was revealed in whirling white. It was especially the size that frightened: this dread thing, remote from human form, was too big for earthly nature— ten feet high, perhaps twelve! Invincible, and horribly quick, it came rushing at him with unnumbered arms striking out towards him.

Next morning, Dr. Crouchorn and his silk hat appeared at Gregory's bedside, thanked Mrs. Fenn for some hot water, and dressed Gregory's leg wound.

"You got off lightly, consider-

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ing," the old man said. "But if you will take a piece of advice from me, Mr. Rolles, you will cease to visit the Grendon farm. It's an evil place and you'll come to no good there."

Gregory nodded. He had told the doctor nothing, except that Grendon had run up and shot him in the leg; which was true enough, but that it omitted most of the story.

"When will I be up again, Doctor?"

"Oh, young flesh heals soon enough, or undertakers would be rich men and doctors paupers. A few days should see you right as rain. But I'll be visiting you again tomorrow, until then you are to stay flat on your back and keep that leg motionless."

"I suppose I may write a letter, doctor?"

"I suppose you may, young man."

Directly Dr. Crouchorn had gone, Gregory took pen and paper and addressed some urgent lines to Nancy. They told her that he loved her very much and could not bear to think of her remaining on the farm; that he could not get to see her for a few days because of his leg wound; and that she must immediately come away on Hetty with a bag full of her things and stay at 'The Wayfarer', where there was a capital room for which he would pay. That if she thought anything of him, she must put the simple plan into action this very day, and send him word round from the inn when she was established there.

With some satisfaction, Gregory read this through twice, signed it and added kisses, and summoned Mrs. Fenn with the aid of a small bell she had provided for that purpose.

He told her that the delivery of the letter was a matter of extreme urgency. He would entrust it to Tommy, the baker's boy, to deliver when his morning round was over, and would give him a shilling for his efforts. Mrs. Fenn was not enthusiastic about this, but with a little flattery was persuaded to speak to Tommy; she left the bedroom clutching both letter and shilling.

At once, Gregory began another letter, this one to Mr. H. G. Wells. It was some while since he had last addressed his correspondent, and so he had to make a somewhat lengthy report; but eventually he came to the events of the previous day.

> "So horrified was I by the sight of the Aurigan, (he wrote) that I stood where I was, unable to move, while the flour blew about us. And how can I now convey to you—who are perhaps the most interested person in this vital subject in all the British Isles—what the monster looked like,

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outlined in white? My impressions were, of course, both brief and indefinite, but the main handicap is that there is nothing on Earth to liken this weird being to!

"It appeared, I suppose, most like some horrendous goose, but the neck must be imagined as almost as thick as the body—indeed, it was almost all body, or all neck, whichever way you look at it. And on top of this neck was no head but a terrible array of various sorts of arms, a nest of writhing cilia, antennae, and whips, for all the world as if an octopus were entangled with a Portuguese Man-'o-war as big as itself, with a few shrimp and starfish legs thrown in. Does this sound ludicrous? I can only swear to you that as it bore down on me, perhaps twice my own height or more, I found it something almost too terrifying for human eyes to look on—and yet I did not see it, but merely the flour that adhered to it!

"That repulsive sight would have been the last my eyes ever dwelt on had it not been for Grubby, the simple farmhand I have had occasion to mention before.

"As I threw the flour, Grubby gave a great cry and rushed forward, dropping the pitchfork. He jumped at the creature as it turned on me. This put out our plan, which was that he and Bruce Fox should pitchfork the creature to death. Instead, he grasped it as high as he possibly might and commenced to squeeze with the full force of his mighty muscles. What a terrifying contest! What a fear-fraught combat!

"Collecting his wits, Bruce charged forward and attacked with his pitchfork. It was his battle cry that brought me back from my paralysis into action. I ran and seized Grubby's pitchfork and also charged. That thing had arms for us all! It struck out, and I have no doubt now that several arms held poisoned needle teeth, for I saw one come towards me gaping like a snake's mouth. Need I stress the danger—particularly when you recall that the effect of the flour cloud was only partial, and there were still invisible arms flailing round us!

"Our saving was that the Aurigan was cowardly. I saw Bruce jab it hard, and a second later, I rammed my pitchfork right through its foot. At once it had had enough. Grubby fell to the ground as it retreated. It moved at amazing speed, back towards the pool. We were in pursuit! And all the beasts of the barnyard uttered their cries to it.

"As it launched itself into

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the water, we both flung our pitchforks at its form. But it swam out strongly and then dived below the surface, leaving only ripples and a scummy trail of flour.

"We stood staring at the water for an instant, and then with common accord ran back to Grubby. He was dead. He lay face up and was no longer recognisable. The Aurigan must have struck him with its poisoned fangs as soon as he attacked. Grubby's skin was stretched tight and glistened oddly. He had turned a dull crimson. No longer was he more than a caricature of human shape. All his internal substance had been transformed to liquid by the rapid-working venoms of the Aurigan; he was like a sort of giant man-shaped rotten haggis.

"There were wound marks across his neck and throat and what had been his face, and from these wounds his substance drained, so that he slowly deflated into his trampled bed of flour and dust. Perhaps the sight of fabled Medusa's head, that turned men to stone, was no worse than this, for we stood there utterly paralysed. It was a blast from Farmer Grendon't rifle that brought us back to life.

"He had threatened to shoot me. Now, seeing us despoiling his flour stocks and apparently about to make off with a calf, he fired at us. We had no choice but to run for it. Grendon was in no explaining mood. Good Nancy came running out to stop him, but Neckland was charging up too with the pair of savage dogs growling at the end of their chains.

"Bruce and I had ridden up on my Daisy. I had left her saddled. Bringing her out of the stable at a trot, I heaved Bruce up into the saddle and was about to climb on myself when the gun went off again and I felt a burning pain in my leg. Bruce dragged me into the saddle and we were off—I half unconscious.

"Here I lie now in bed, and should be about again in a couple of days. Fortunately, the shot did not harm any bones.

"So you see how the farm is now a place of the damned! Once, I thought it might even become a new Eden, growing the food of the gods for men like gods. Instead—alas! the first meeting between humanity and beings from another world has proved disastrous, and the Eden is become a battleground for a war of worlds. How can our anticipations for the future be anything other than gloomy?

"Before I close this over-long account, I must answer a query in your letter and pose another

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to you, more personal than yours to me.

"First, you question if the Aurigans are entirely invisible and say—if I may quote your letter—'Any alteration in the refractive index of the eye lenses would make vision impossible, but without such alteration the eyes would be visible as glassy globules. And for vision it is also necessary that there should be visual purple behind the retina and an opaque cornea. How then do your Aurigans manage for vision?' The answer must be that they do without eyesight as we know it, for I think they naturally maintain a complete invisibility. How they 'see' I know not, but whatever sense they use, it is effective. How they communicate I know not—our fellow made not the slightest sound when I speared his foot!—yet it is apparent they must communicate effectively. Perhaps they tried originally to communicate with us through a mysterious sense we do not possess and, on receiving no answer, assumed us to be as dumb as our dumb animals. If so, what a tragedy!

"Now to my personal enquiry. I know, sir, that you must grow more busy as you grow more famous; but I feel that what transpires here in this remote corner of East Anglia is of momentous import to the world and the future. Could you not take it upon yourself to pay us a visit here? You would be comfortable at one of our two inns, and the journey here by railway is efficient if tedious—you can easily get a regular waggon from Heigham station here, a distance of only eight miles. You could then view Grendon's farm for yourself, and perhaps one of these interstellar beings too. I feel you are as much amused as concerned by the accounts you receive from the undersigned, but I swear not one detail is exaggerated. Say you can come!

"If you need persuasion, reflect on how much delight it will give to

"Your sincere admirer,

"Gregory Rolles".

Reading this long letter through, scratching out two superfluous adjectives, Gregory lay back in some satisfaction. He had the feeling he was still involved in the struggle although temporarily out of action.

But the later afternoon brought him disquieting news. Tommy, the baker's boy, had gone out as far as the Grendon farm. Then the ugly legends circulating in the village about the place had risen in his mind, and he had stood wondering whether he should go on. An unnatural babble of ani-

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mal noise came from the farm, mixed with hammering, and when Tommy crept forward and saw the farmer himself looking as black as a puddle and building a great thing like a gibbet in the yard, he had lost his nerve and rushed back the way he came, the letter to Nancy undelivered.

Gregory lay on the bed worrying about Nancy until Mrs. Fenn brought up supper on a tray. At least it was clear now why the Aurigans had not entered the farm house; they were far too large to do so. She was safe as long as she kept indoors—as far as anyone on that doomed plot was safe.

He fell asleep early that night. In the early hours of the morning, nightmare visited him. He was in a strange city where all the buildings were new and the people wore shining clothes. In one square grew a tree. The Gregory in the dream stood in a special relationship to the tree: he fed it. It was his job to push people who were passing by the tree against its surface. The tree was a saliva tree. Down its smooth bark ran quantities of saliva from red lips like leaves up in the boughs. It grew enormous on the people on which it fed. As they were thrown against it, they passed into the substance of the tree. Some of the saliva splashed on to Gregory. But instead of dissolving him, it caused everything he touched to be dissolved. He put his arms about the girl he loved, and as his mouth went towards hers, her skin peeled away from her face.

He woke weeping desperately and fumbling blindly for the ring of the gas mantle.

Dr. Crouchorn came late next morning and told Gregory he should have at least three more days complete rest for the recovery of the muscles of his leg. Gregory lay there in a state of acute dissatisfaction with himself. Recalling the vile dream, he thought how negligent he had been towards Nancy, the girl he loved. His letter to her still lay undelivered by his bedside. After Mrs. Fenn had brought up his dinner, he determined that he must see Nancy for himself. Leaving the food, he pulled himself out of bed and dressed slowly.

The leg was more painful than he had expected, but he got himself downstairs and out to the stable without too much trouble. Daisy seemed pleased to see him. He rubbed her nose and rested his head against her long cheek in sheer pleasure at being with her again.

"This may be the last time you have to undertake this particular journey, my girl," he said.

Saddling her was comparatively easy. Getting into the saddle involved much bodily anguish. But eventually he was comfortable and they turned along the fa-

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miliar and desolate road to the domain of the Aurigans. His leg was worse than he had bargained for. More than once, he had to get the mare to stop while he let the throbbing subside. He saw he was losing blood plentifully.

As he approached the farm, he observed what the baker's boy had meant by saying Grendon was building a gibbet. A pole had been set up in the middle of the yard. A cable ran to the top of it, and a light was rigged there, so that the expanse of the yard could be illuminated by night.

Another change had taken place. A wooden fence had been built behind the horse trough, cutting off the pond from the farm. But at one point, ominously, a section of it had been broken down and splintered and crushed, as if some monstrous thing had walked through the barrier unheeding.

A ferocious dog was chained just inside the gate, and barking its head off, to the consternation of the poultry. Gregory dare not enter. As he stood wondering the best way to tackle this fresh problem, the door of the farmhouse opened fractionally and Nancy peeped out. He called and signalled frantically to her.

Timidly, she ran across and let him in, dragging the dog back. Gregory kissed her cheek, soothed by the feel of her sturdy body in his arms.

"Where's your father?"

"My dearest, your leg, your poor leg! It's bleeding yet!"

"Never mind my leg. Where's your father?"

"He's down in South Meadow, I think."

"Good! I'm going to speak with him. Nancy, I want you to go indoors and pack some belongings. I'm taking you away with me."

"I can't leave father!"

"You must. I'm going to tell him now." As he limped across the yard, she called fearfully, "He has that there gun of his'n with him all the time—do be careful!"

The two dogs on a running chain followed him all the way down the side of the house, nearly choking in their efforts to get at him, their teeth flashing uncomfortably close to his ankles. He noticed Neckland below Grubby's little hut, busy sawing wood; the farmer was not with him. On impulse, Gregory turned into the sties.

It was gloomy there. In the gloom, Grendon worked. He dropped his bucket when he saw Gregory there, and came forward threateningly.

"You came back? Why don't you stay away? Can't you see the notice by the gate? I don't want you here no more, bor. I know you mean well, and I intend you no harm, but I'll kill 'ee, understand, kill 'ee if you ever come here again. I've plenty of worries with-

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out you to add to them. Now then, get you going!"

Gregory stood his ground.

"Mr. Grendon, are you as mad as your wife was before she died? Do you understand that you may meet Grubby's fate at any moment? Do you realise what you are harbouring in your pond?"

"I ent a fule. But suppose them there things do eat everything, humans included? Suppose this is now their farm? They still got to have someone tend it. So I reckon they ent going to harm me. So long as they sees me work hard, they ent going to harm me."

"You're being fattened, do you understand? For all the hard work you do, you must have put on a stone this last month. Doesn't that scare you?"

Something of the farmer's pose broke for a moment. He cast a wild look round. "I ent saying I ent scared. I'm saying I'm doing what I have to do. We don't own our lives. Now do me a favour and get out of here."

Instinctively, Gregory's glance had followed Grendon's. For the first time, he saw in the dimness the size of the pigs. Their great broad black backs were visible over the top of the sties. They were the size of young oxen.

"This is a farm of death," he said.

"Death's always the end of all of us, pig or cow or man alike."

"Right-ho, Mr. Grendon, you can think like that if you like. It's not my way of thinking, nor am I going to see your dependents suffer from your madness. Mr. Grendon, sir, I wish to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage."

For the first three days that she was away from her home, Nancy Grendon lay in her room in 'The Wayfarer' near to death. It seemed as if all ordinary food poisoned her. But gradually under Doctor Crouchorn's ministration—terrified perhaps by the rage she suspected he would vent upon her should she fail to get better—she recovered her strength.

"You look so much better today," Gregory said, clasping her hand. "You'll soon be up and about again, once your system is free of all the evil nourishment of the farm."

"Greg, dearest, promise me you will not go to the farm again. You have no need to go now I'm not there."

He cast his eyes down and said, "Then you don't have to get me to promise, do you?"

"I just want to be sure we neither of us go there again. Father, I feel sure, bears a charmed life. It's as if I was now coming to my senses again—but I don't want it to be as if you was losing yours! Supposing those things followed us here to Cottersall, those Aurigans?"

"You know, Nancy, I've won-

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dered several times why they remain on the farm as they do. You would think that once they found they could so easily defeat human beings, they would attack everyone, or send for more of their own kind and try to invade us. Yet they seem perfectly content to remain in that one small space."

She smiled. "I may not be very clever compared with you, but I tell 'ee the answer to that one. They ent interested in going anywhere. I think there's just two of them, and they come to our little old world for a holiday in their space machine, same as we might go to Great Yarmouth for a couple of days for our honeymoon. Perhaps they're on their honeymoon."

"On honeymoon! What a ghastly idea!"

"Well, on holiday then. That was father's idea—he says as there's just two of them, treating Earth as a quiet place to stay. People like to eat well when they're on holiday, don't they?"

He stared at Nancy aghast.

"But that's horrible! You're trying to make the Aurigans out to be *pleasant!*"

"Of course I ent, you silly ha'p'orth! But I expect they seem pleasant to each other."

"Well, I prefer to think of them as menaces."

"All the more reason for you to keep away from them!"

But to be out of sight was not to be out of mind's reach. Gregory received another letter from Dr. Hudson-Ward, a kind and encouraging one, but he made no attempt to answer it. He felt he could not bear to take up any work that would remove him from the neighbourhood, although the need to work, in view of his matrimonial plans, was now pressing; the modest allowance his father made him would not support two in any comfort. Yet he could not bring his thoughts to grapple with such practical problems. It was another letter he looked for, and the horrors of the farm that obsessed him. And the next night, he dreamed of the saliva tree again.

In the evening, he plucked up enough courage to tell Fox and Nancy about it. They met in the little snug at the back of The Wayfarer's public bar, a discreet and private place with red plush on the seats. Nancy was her usual self again, and had been out for a brief walk in the afternoon sunshine.

"People wanted to give themselves to the saliva tree. And although I didn't see this for myself, I had the distinct feeling that perhaps they weren't actually killed so much as changed into something else—something less human maybe. And this time, I saw the tree was made of metal of some kind and was growing bigger and bigger by pumps—you could see through the saliva to big arma-

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tures and pistons, and out of the branches steam was pouring."

Fox laughed, a little unsympathetically. "Sounds to me like the shape of things to come, when even plants are grown by machinery. Events are preying on your mind, Greg! Listen, my sister is going to Norwich tomorrow, driving in her uncle's trap. Why don't the two of you go with her? She's going to buy some adornments for her bridal gown, so that should interest you, Nancy. Then you could stay with Greg's uncle for a couple of days. I assure you I will let you know immediately the Aurigans invade Cottersall, so you won't miss anything."

Nancy seized Gregory's arm. "Can we please, Gregory, can we? I ent been to Norwich for long enough and it's a fine city."

"It would be a good idea," he said doubtfully.

Both of them pressed him until he was forced to yield. He broke up the little party as soon as he decently could, kissed Nancy good-night, and walked hurriedly back down the street to the baker's. Of one thing he was certain: if he must leave the district even for a short while, he had to have a look to see what was happening at the farm before he went.

The farm looked in the summer's dusk as it had never done before. Massive wooden screens nine feet high had been erected and hastily creosoted. They stood about in forlorn fashion, intended to keep the public gaze from the farm, but lending it unmeaning. They stood not only in the yard but at irregular intervals along the boundaries of the land, inappropriately among fruit trees, desolately amid bracken, irrelevantly in swamp. A sound of furious hammering, punctuated by the unwearying animal noises, indicated that more screens were still being built.

But what lent the place its unearthly look was the lighting. The solitary pole supporting electric light now had five companions: one by the gate, one by the pond, one behind the house, one outside the engine house, one down by the pigsties. Their hideous yellow glare reduced the scene to the sort of unlikely picture that might be found and puzzled over in the eternal midnight of an Egyptian tomb.

Gregory was too wise to try and enter by the gate. He hitched Daisy to the low branches of a thorn tree and set off over waste land, entering Grendon's property by the South Meadow. As he walked stealthily towards the distant outhouses, he could see how the farm land differed from the territory about it. The corn was already so high it seemed in the dark almost to threaten by its ceaseless whisper of movement. The fruits had ripened fast. In the

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strawberry beds were great strawberries like pears. The marrows lay on their dunghill like bloated bolsters, gleaming from a distant shaft of light. In the orchard, the trees creaked, weighed down by distorted footballs that passed for apples; with a heavy autumnal thud one fell over-ripe to the ground. Everywhere on the farm, there seemed to be slight movement and noise, so much so that Gregory stopped to listen.

A wind was rising. The sails of the old mill shrieked like a gull's cry as they began to turn. In the engine house, the steam engine pumped out its double unfaltering note as it generated power. The dogs still raged, the animals added their uneasy chorus. He recalled the saliva tree; here as in the dream, it was as if agriculture had become industry, and the impulses of nature swallowed by the new god of Science. In the bark of the trees rose the dark steam of novel and unknown forces.

He talked himself into pressing forward again. He moved carefully through the baffling slices of shadow and illumination created by the screens and lights, and arrived near the back door of the farmhouse. A lantern burnt in the kitchen window. As Gregory hesitated, the crunch of broken glass came from within.

Cautiously, he edged himself past the window and peered in through the doorway. From the parlour, he heard the voice of Grendon. It held a curious muffled tone, as if the man spoke to himself.

"Lie there! You're no use to me. This is a trial of strength. Oh God, preserve me, to let me prove myself! Thou has made my land barren till now—now let me harvest it! I don't know what You're doing. I didn't mean to presume, but this here farm is my life. Curse 'em, curse 'em all! They're all enemies." There was more of it; the man was muttering like one drunk. With a horrid fascination, Gregory was drawn forward till he had crossed the kitchen flags and stood on the verge of the larger room. He peered round the half open door until he could see the farmer, standing obscurely in the middle of the room.

A candle stood in the neglected hearth, its flickering flame glassily reflected in the cases of maladroit animals. Evidently the house electricity had been cut off to give additional power to the new lights outside.

Grendon's back was to Gregory. One gaunt and unshaven cheek was lit by candle-light. His back seemed a little bent by the weight of what he imagined his duties, yet looking at that leather-clad back now Gregory experienced a sort of reverence for the independence of the man, and for the mystery that lay under his plainness. He watched as Grendon moved

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out through the front door, leaving it hanging wide, and passed into the yard, still muttering to himself. He walked round the side of the house and was hidden from view as the sound of his tread was lost amid the renewed barking of dogs.

The tumult did not drown a groan from near at hand. Peering into the shadows, Gregory saw a body lying under the table. It rolled over, crunching broken glass as it did so, and exclaimed in a dazed way. Without being able to see clearly, Gregory knew it was Neckland. He climbed over to the man and propped his head up, kicking away a stuffed fish as he did so.

"Don't kill me, bor! I only want to get away from here."

"Bert? It's Greg here. Bert, are you badly hurt?"

He could see some wounds. The fellow's shirt had been practically torn from his back, and the flesh on his side and back was cut from where he had rolled in the glass. More serious was a great weal over one shoulder, changing to a deeper colour as Gregory looked at it.

Wiping his face and speaking in a more rational voice, Neckland said, "Gregory? I thought as you was down Cottersall? What you doing here? He'll kill you proper if he finds you here!"

"What happened to you, Bert? Can you get up?"

The labourer was again in possession of his faculties. He grabbed Gregory's forearm and said imploringly, "Keep your voice down, for Christ's sake, or he'll hear us and come back and settle my hash for once for all! He's gone clean off his head, says as these pond things are having a holiday here. He nearly knocked my head off my shoulder with that stick of his! Lucky I got a thick head!"

"What was the quarrel about?"

"I tell you straight, bor, I have got the wind up proper about this here farm. They things as live in the pond will eat me and suck me up like they done Grubby if I stay here any more. So I run off when Joe Grendon weren't looking, and I come in here to gather up my traps and my bits and leave here at once. This whole place is evil, a bed of evil, and it ought to be destroyed. Hell can't be worse than this here farm!"

As he spoke, he pulled himself to his feet and stood, keeping his balance with Gregory's aid. Grunting, he made his way over to the staircase.

"Bert,' Gregory said, "supposing we rush Grendon and lay him out. We can then get him in the cart and all leave together."

Neckland turned to stare at him, his face hidden in shadows, nursing his shoulder with one hand.

"You try it!" he said, and then

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he turned and went steadily up the stairs.

Gregory stood where he was, keeping one eye on the window. He had come to the farm without any clear notion in his head, but now that the idea had been formulated, he saw that it was up to him to try and remove Grendon from his farm. He felt obliged to do it; for although he had lost his former regard for Grendon, a sort of fascination for the man held him, and he was incapable of leaving any human being, however perverse, to face alone the alien horrors of the farm. It occurred to him that he might get help from the distant houses, Dereham Cottages, if only the farmer were rendered in one way or another unable to pepper the intruders with shot.

The machine house possessed only one high window, and that was barred. It was built of brick and had a stout door which could be barred and locked from the outside. Perhaps it would be possible to lure Grendon into there; outside aid could then be obtained.

Not without apprehension, Gregory went to the open door and peered out into the confused dark. He stared anxiously at the ground for sight of a footstep more sinister than the farmer's, but there was no indication that the Aurigans were active. He stepped into the yard.

He had not gone two yards before a woman's screams rang out. The sound seemed to clamp an icy grip about Gregory's ribs, and into his mind came a picture of poor mad Mrs. Grendon. Then he recognised the voice, in its few shouted words, as Nancy's. Even before the sound cut off, he began to pelt down the dark side of the house as fast as he could run.

Only later did he realise how he seemed to be running against a great army of animal cries. Loudest was the babel of the pigs; every swine seemed to have some message deep and nervous and indecipherable to deliver to an unknown source; and it was to the sties that Gregory ran, swerving past the giant screens under the high and sickly light.

The noise in the sties was deafening. Every animal was attacking its pen with its sharp hooves. One light swung over the middle pen. With its help, Gregory saw immediately how terrible was the change that had come over the farm since his last visit. The sows had swollen enormously and their great ears clattered against their cheeks like boards. Their hirsute backs curved almost to the rafters of their prison.

Grendon was at the far entrance. In his arms he held the unconscious form of his daughter. A sack of pig feed lay scattered by his feet. He had one pen gate half open and was trying to thrust his way in against the flank of a pig

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whose mighty shoulder came almost level with his. He turned and stared at Gregory with a face whose blankness was more terrifying than any expression of rage.

There was another presence in the place. A pen gate near to Gregory swung open. The two sows wedged in the narrow sty gave out a terrible falsetto squealing, clearly scenting the presence of an unappeasable hunger. They kicked out blindly, and all the other animals plunged with a sympathetic fear. Struggle was useless. An Aurigan was there; the figure of Death itself, with its unwearying scythe and unaltering smile of bone, was as easily avoided as this poisoned and unseen presence. A rosy flush spread over the back of one of the sows. Almost at once, her great bulk began to collapse; in a moment, her substance had been ingested.

Gregory did not stay to watch the sickening action. He was running forward, for the farmer was again on the move. And now it was clear what he was going to do. He pushed into the end sty and dropped his daughter down into the metal food trough. At once, the sows turned with smacking jaws to deal with this new fodder. His hands free, Grendon moved to a bracket set in the wall. There lay his gun.

Now the uproar in the sties had reached its loudest. The sow whose companion had been so rapidly ingested broke free and burst into the central aisle. For a moment she stood—mercifully, for otherwise Gregory would have been trampled—as if dazed by the possibility of liberty. The place shook and the other swine fought to get to her. Brick crumbled, pen gates buckled. Gregory jumped aside as the second pig lumbered free, and next moment the place was full of grotesque fighting bodies, fighting their way to liberty.

He had reached Grendon, but the stampede caught them even as they confronted each other. A hoof stabbed down on Grendon's instep. Groaning, he bent forward, and was at once swept underfoot by his creatures. Gregory barely had time to vault into the nearest pen before they thundered by. Nancy was trying pitifully to climb out of the trough as the two beasts to which she had been offered fought to kick their way free. With a ferocious strength—without reason—almost without consciousness—Gregory hauled her up, jumped until he swung up on one of the overhead beams, wrapped a leg round the beam, hung down till he grasped Nancy, pulled her up with him.

They were safe, but the safety was not permanent. Through the din and dust, they could see that the gigantic beasts were wedged tightly in both entrances. In the middle was a sort of battlefield,

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where the animals fought to reach the opposite end of the building; they were gradually tearing each other to pieces—but the sties too were theatened with demolition.

"I had to follow you," Nancy gasped. "But Father—I don't think he even recognised me!"

At least, Gregory thought, she had not seen her father trampled underfoot. Involuntarily glancing in that direction, he saw the shotgun that Grendon had never managed to reach still lying across a bracket on the wall. By crawling along a transverse beam, he could reach it easily. Bidding Nancy sit where she was, he wriggled along the beam, only a foot or two above the heaving backs of the swine. At least the gun should afford them some protection: the Aurigan, despite all its ghastly differences from humanity, would hardly be immune to lead.

As he grasped the old-fashioned weapon and pulled it up, Gregory was suddenly filled with an intense desire to kill one of the invisible monsters. In that instant, he recalled an earlier hope he had had of them: that they might be superior beings, beings of wisdom and enlightened power, coming from a better society where higher moral codes directed the activities of its citizens. He had thought that only to such a civilization would the divine gift of travelling through interplanetary space be granted. But perhaps the opposite held true: perhaps such a great objective could be gained only by species ruthless enough to disregard more humane ends. As soon as he thought it, his mind was overpowered with a vast diseased vision of the universe, where such races as dealt in love and kindness and intellect cowered forever on their little globes, while all about them went the slayers of the universe, sailing where they would to satisfy their cruelties and their endless appetites.

He heaved his way back to Nancy above the bloody porcine fray.

She pointed mutely. At the far end, the entrance had crumbled away, and the sows were bursting forth into the night. But one sow fell and turned crimson as it fell, sogging over the floor like a shapeless bag. Another, passing the same spot, suffered the same fate.

Was the Aurigan moved by anger? Had the pigs, in their blind charging, injured it? Gregory raised the gun and aimed. As he did so, he saw a faint halucinatory column in the air; enough dirt and mud and blood had been thrown up to spot the Aurigan and render him partly visible. Gregory fired.

The recoil nearly knocked him off his perch. He shut his eyes, dazed by the noise, and was dimly aware of Nancy clinging to him, shouting, "Oh, you marvellous man, you marvellous man!

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You hit that old bor right smack on target!"

He opened his eyes and peered through the smoke and dust. The shade that represented the Aurigan was tottering. It fell. It fell among the distorted shapes of the two sows it had killed, and corrupt fluids splattered over the paving. Then it rose again. They saw its progress to the broken door, and then it had gone.

For a minute, they sat there, staring at each other, triumph and speculation mingling on both their faces. Apart from one badly injured beast, the building was clear of pigs now. Gregory climbed to the floor and helped Nancy down beside him. They skirted the loathsome messes as best they could and staggered into the fresh air.

Up beyond the orchard, strange lights showed in the rear windows of the farmhouse.

"It's on fire! Oh, Greg, our poor home is afire! Quick, we must gather what we can! All father's lovely cases—"

He held her fiercely, bent so that he spoke straight into her face. "Bert Neckland did this! He did it! He told me the place ought to be destroyed and that's what he did."

"Let's go, then—"

"No, no, Nancy, we must let it burn! Listen! There's a wounded Aurigan loose here somewhere. We didn't kill him. If those things feel rage, anger, spite, they'll be set to kill us now—don't forget there's more than one of 'em! We aren't going that way if we want to live. Daisy's just across the meadow here, and she'll bear us both safe home."

"Greg, dearest, this is my home!", she cried in her despair.

The flames were leaping higher. The kitchen windows broke in a shower of glass. He was running with her in the opposite direction, shouting wildly, "I'm your home now! I'm your home now!"

Now she was running with him, no longer protesting, and they plunged together through the high rank grass.

When they gained the track and the restive mare, they paused to take breath and look back.

The house was well ablaze now. Clearly nothing could save it. Sparks had carried to the windmill, and one of the sails was ablaze. About the scene, the electric lights shone spectral and pale on the tops of their poles. An occasional running figure of a gigantic animal dived about its own purposes. Suddenly, there was a flash as of lightning and all the electric lights went out. One of the stampeding animals had knocked down a pole; crashing into the pond, it short-circuited the system.

"Let's get away," Gregory said, and he helped Nancy on to the mare. As he climbed up behind her, a roaring sound developed,

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grew in volume and altered in pitch. Abruptly it died again. A thick cloud of steam billowed above the pond. From it rose the space machine, rising, rising, rising, suddenly a sight to take the heart in awe. It moved up into the soft night sky, was lost for a moment, began dully to glow, was seen to be already tremendously far away.

Desperately, Gregory looked for it, but it had gone, already beyond the frail confines of the terrestrial atmosphere. An awful desolation settled on him, the more awful for being irrational, and then he thought, and cried his thought aloud, "Perhaps they were only holiday-makers here! Perhaps they enjoyed themselves here, and will tell their friends of this little globe! Perhaps Earth has a future only as a resort for millions of the Aurigan kind!"

The church clock was striking midnight as they passed the first cottages of Cottersall.

"We'll go first to the inn," Gregory said. "I can't well disturb Mrs. Fenn at this late hour, but your landlord will fetch us food and hot water and see that your cuts are bandaged."

"I'm right as rain, love, but I'd be glad of your company."

"I warn you, you shall have too much of it from now on!"

The door of the inn was locked, but a light burned inside, and in a moment the landlord himself opened to them, all eager to hear a bit of gossip he could pass on to his custom.

"So happens as there's a gentleman up in Number Three wishes to speak with you in the morning," he told Gregory. "Very nice gentleman came on the night train, only got in here an hour past, off the waggon."

Gregory made a wry face.

"My father, no doubt."

"Oh, no, sir. His name is a Mr. Wills or Wells or Walls—his signature was a mite difficult to make out."

"Wells! Mr. Wells! So he's come!" He caught Nancy's hands, shaking them in his excitement. "Nancy, one of the greatest men in England is here! There's no one more profitable for such a tale as ours! I'm going up to speak with him right away."

Kissing her lightly on the cheek, he hurried up the stairs and knocked on the door of Number Three.

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"Marsha, you're tending to lead again!"

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In this, Ron Goulart's latest Max Kearny story, the occult detective gets married. There are very few married ghost detectives (or detectives of any sort, for that matter) so there is some indication that this bizarre story of the phantom advertising agency and its invisible secretary may indeed be Kearny's last case. However, if we remember that Sherlock Holmes was revived from apparent death and that marriage is not so final as death, then perhaps we shall be seeing more of Kearny.

KEARNY'S LAST CASE

by Ron Goulart

MAX KEARNY SHOOK HIS HEAD. "I'm giving up occult detective work." He turned and started across Union Square.

Three pigeons drifted by, borne on the harsh April wind. Walter Terrace waited until the birds passed and then caught up with Max. "But this is genuine black magic." He was a tall young man in his late twenties, crewcut and with faintly cherubic cheeks. "With a girl in distress, Max."

"No," said Max, heading for the sunken garage. "It's only a hobby, a sideline, with me anyway. I'm settling down, Walt."

Terrace stood in line with Max at the cashier's window. "Black magic, Max. Really. Invisibility. Not to mention the lousy wage structure and lack of fringe benefits."

In the elevator dropping to level 3 Max said, "Walt, I'm getting married a week from Saturday."

"I know that," said Terrace. "Ann has already picked out the gift, Max. You can't stand by and let a girl who's giving you and your bride a set of stainless steel cutlery be plagued by human fiends. Damn, see how unsettled I am? Spoiling the surprise."

The elevator whoosed open and Max began wandering among the silent cars. "I can't. Jillian is a nice sedate girl. She even went to college in Connecticut for a year, Walt. No, no more ghost breaking. It's a time for settling down. You'll find out when you and Ann finally get married."

"How can you settle down when your wife is subject to spells of invisibility?"

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They found Max' car. "I have to pick Jillian up at her apartment," Max said. "We're driving across to Sausalito to talk to this reverend she found."

"That's a picturesque church over there," said Terrace. "I'd like to get married in it, so would Ann. Still, you can't walk down the aisle with an invisible girl. And people'd balk at catching a bouquet tossed out of nowhere."

Max hesitated, got out his keys, slid in behind the wheel. "I can give you a lift out to your place, it's on the way. Tell me while we drive. Maybe I can suggest something."

"Great," said Terrace, hopping in.

As they wound the shadowy tunnels toward daylight Max said, "You've never mentioned this before."

"It's only been a month."

"That's a long time to be invisible." Max headed the car up Post Street.

"She's not invisible all the time," said Terrace. His fingers drummed on the arm rest. "Only when she goes to look for a job."

Max frowned. "That sounds psychosomatic."

"No, it's her boss."

A seagull flapped down and danced briefly on Max' hood ornament. Max honked the horn and the bird rose away. "Her boss? I thought Ann worked at some ad agency. Like all of us."

"Sort of," said Terrace. He got a clay pipe carefully out of his inside coat pocket and filled it from a red leather pouch. "Gift from Ann," he explained, lighting up. "Until recently she's always been evasive about exactly where she worked."

"Isn't it an agency? I thought she was a secretary."

"Ever hear," said Terrace, exhaling smoke, "of . . . well, of the phantom agency?"

"What?"

"The phantom agency. I'd heard vague rumors, never believed in it. That's who Ann works for."

Max made a right turn. "I've never heard of them. Tell me."

"The real name is," said Terrace, "Calder and Peppercorn. They have officies, I think, over in North Beach. Underground actually. Under an old antique shop, Ann says."

"What are they, industrial spies?"

"Wizards and warlocks," said Terrace.

"Oh, so?"

"Yeah, they handle all kinds of arcane accounts. Like the biggest wolfbane supplier in the world, a mammoth love potion outfit, one large alchemy equipment house. They do advertising for a whole batch of occult clients, in you wouldn't believe what out of the way media."

"Funny I've never run into them."

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"They're sly."

"How'd Ann get involved?"

"Answered an ad. Even warlocks need good typists. She's 90 words a minute."

"Okay," said Max. "Now about the invisibility."

"They don't," said his friend, "want her to leave. But she wants to get out. Whenever they get wind she's going out on an interview for a new job they hex her. She gets to the office building she's going to okay but somewhere, usually in the elevator—she scared one operator into freezing between floors for 45 minutes—she just vanishes. She's getting used to it but it's upsetting. And see, Max, how can we plan a marriage with this hanging over us. That was my apartment two blocks back."

"Oh, yeah, sorry." Max u-turned. "Look, Walt, I did sort of promise Jillian—not that she asked but I wanted to—to cut out the occult screwing around. Hell, I like Ann."

"Couldn't you take on one last case?"

Max, braking the car, said, "Okay. I'll talk to some people and check around. Try to fix things up. I'll call you in a couple of days."

"She has a job interview on Friday," said Terrace. He got out of the car.

"Could be gone by Friday. Let's hope so," said Max.

He was fifteen minutes late getting to his fiancee's place.

The little church in Sausalito, over the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco, was one story ranch style as well as Gothic. It was glass and redwood, encrusted with carved gargoyles and stunted spires. The Reverend Allan was standing in front of it. A thin middle-aged man in dark slacks, a tweed coat and buff sneakers. "Tell me once more who you are," he said.

"Max Kearny and Jillian Shender," said Max.

"We're getting married here a week from Saturday at 3:30," Jillian said. She was a small and slender girl, auburn haired and blue eyed.

"Saturday next? Why didn't I remember that?" Allan thought and small crescents formed under his round eyes. "You're the furniture man and his acrobat, right?"

"No," said Jillian. Her voice had a faint Eastern, faint British touch. "We're the advertising man and his food consultant."

"Certainly, I know." He nodded. "Lots of romance in the ad game. Mad Ave."

"Monty Street," said Max.

Allan chuckled. "I get a great many ideas on how to sell things. In my work it's selling, too."

"We met through advertising," Jillian told him.

"Yeah," said Max. "I'm an art director and one day Jillian came in to our agency to be consulted. She was there to tell us how to

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photograph a stuffed turkey and we fell in love."

"Now see," said Reverend Allan, "I wouldn't know the first thing about photographing a turkey." He cocked his head. "Little bells."

Far off in the twilight a tiny doorbell seemed to be ringing.

"It's my boys, Randolph and Phil. They have a little intercom between my study and the house. I'll trot over and see what they want. You young people go into my study. Inside and to your left. I won't be a moment." He trotted off.

Max took Jillian's hand. "Why'd we tell him so much about ourselves?"

"I'm nervous."

"Oh?"

"About the wedding, sure," Jillian said. "But what you told me about Walt and Ann."

They went under a gargoyle bordered doorway and turned left. Allan's study was locked and they sat on a clawfooted bench. "Don't let it worry you."

"Max," said Jillian. She took her hand away and spread both flat on her lap. "I think I should tell you."

"Tell me?"

"I should have when you told me about your occult detective work," the girl said. "You really don't have to give that up. This case, though. Please don't go near Calder and Peppercorn."

"You've heard of them then?"

Jillian, head lowered, said, "I used to work there."

"What? When?"

"Only for a few months," said Jillian. "Max, allright, I'll tell you it all. We are almost man and wife. Two of my aunts were out and out witches in upstate Vermont. I have a small knack for magic myself and when I needed money when I first got to San Francisco somebody put me on to them. I'm not only a food consultant I worked a few simple spells for Knox Peppercorn."

Max swallowed. Then he smiled. "It's good you're a little magic. It gives us even more in common."

"I'm sorry. Earlier is when I should have spoken up."

"Maybe. You've said it now." Max lit a cigarette. "So could you give me an angle on Peppercorn?"

"Max." Jillian gripped his arm. "He's a wizard. Really. Don't go near him. He'll hurt you."

"Come on," said Max. "I've run into wizards and warlocks before, Jillian. I'm not incompetent."

"I didn't say you were."

"You implied."

"No, Max."

"And now that I think of it, who was the guy who told you to see Peppercorn in the first place. You never mentioned him before either."

"Don't yell, Max."

"I'm not jealous, merely curious."

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"Would either of you like a peanut butter sandwich?" asked Reverend Allan. "My boys, Randolph and Phil, made up some extras." He showed them a deck of sandwiches.

Max said no. As did Jillian.

W. R. Pedway ran a book shop near Max' apartment. It was the small grey haired Pedway who'd gotten Max interested in occult detection originally. The next day after work Max dropped in to consult him about Walter Terrace's problem.

"How's Jillian?" asked Pedway from up on a ladder.

"She said she couldn't see me tonight," said Max. "Some personal thing that's a surprise. Maybe she's mad."

"There are very few married ghost detectives," said Pedway. He finished stacking a matched set of Balzac and climbed down.

"I'm giving that up anyway. This is my last case."

Pedway closed one eye. "What is?"

Max told him about Calder and Peppercorn, outlined the problems Ann Upland, Walt Terrace's girlfriend, was having. "I've never heard of those guys before," Max concluded.

"I have," said Pedway. "Didn't consider them important enough to mention."

"Apparently," said Max, taking one of the wicker chairs between the book bins, "Jillian used to work for them. I asked her to tell me how she broke loose but we got into a debate and she didn't."

Pedway eased a hand under the stomach of his orange cat, who was asleep on a bound volume of St. Nicholas Magazine, and got his corncob pipe. "That's a whole new facet of Jillian's. Congratulations."

Max gave him some background on the facet. "Stop grinning," he said, finishing.

"Two witches in the family. At least. I knew you couldn't turn your back on the occult." He ignited a wood match with his thumbnail.

"What do you know about Calder and Peppercorn?"

"Calder's a nonentity," said Pedway, puffing at the corncob. "Used to be a muscle reader in a carnival in the 30's, probably even a geek for a time. Then he did escape stuff in a magic show that toured mostly in Nebraska but that ended when he couldn't get out of a milkcan one day in Omaha. He has no real powers at all, though he's a nice crook."

"And Knox Peppercorn?"

"A real wizard. Born in Vienna in 1746 and . . ."

"How do you know that?"

"It's on his job resume," said the bookdealer. "I have a swiped copy someplace. He's worked at transmutation, mesmerism, black magic. For awhile he drove a gondola in Venice."

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Max leaned back against a row of James Oliver Curwood and asked, "How about a way to get Ann Upland out of there? I know some good anti-invisibility things but this isn't as simple as that."

"A drug company in Bavaria has an aerosol can for it now," said Pedway. "One swish, and anybody turns visible. Salesman left me a sample can. Also some wolfbane made from soybeans. Looks and smells like the real stuff. Only hitch so far is the werewolves don't believe in it. Thing to do for Peppercorn is deactivate him, unmagic him. Or threaten to."

"I'd feel bad threatening an old man."

"He only looks fifty," said Pedway. He grunted and reached under the counter. "Got this a few days ago." He held up a yellow covered paperback. "This is put out by a firm in Bavaria, too. New paperback, in English, on thwarting wizards and warlocks."

Max read the title. "That says *The Art Of French Pastry.*"

"To fool customs," said Pedway. "Trust me. These are good spells for disarming black magicians. Fine simple diagrams, too, in cartoon style. Lots of the old books have those rotten woodcuts with everyone out of proportion."

Max said, "Okay," taking the book. "What would you suggest for Peppercorn?"

"Oh," said Pedway. "Try page 34 and page 86 to start."

"This better not be a cook book." It wasn't.

The next day, an hour before quitting time, the city was tangled in fog. Max was running down the stone steps that led to Jillian's street. He hadn't heard from her since yesterday, hadn't been able to reach her on the phone.

At three she was to have been at a test kitchen over on Howard Street to supervise the filming of a coleslaw commercial. Max had phoned over there three times. Jillian hadn't showed.

The wrought iron gate in front of her Victorian apartment house stuck and Max climbed over, landing flatfooted on the small lawn.

"Why it's Mr. Kearny," said a slow weary voice, "isn't it?"

"It is," said Max, spotting Jillian's landlady standing next to the sundial and peering from behind a cluster of green bamboo. "Would you know if Jillian is home, Mrs. Shuttlecock?"

"Well," said the heavy old woman, touching at the fur collar of her blue cloth coat. Behind her the three story, narrow, house made a creaking sound and a piece of gingerbread fell free. "There's been a lot of that lately. I'm afraid the house is nowhere as ornate as it was in Mr. Shuttlecock's day. To refurbish it at this time, though, would be too dear."

Max shifted on his feet. "Jillian?"

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"And the faucets in Mr. Flanneroy's closet make a plug-plug-plug noise at night. You realize this was once a home for just one big eccentric pre-quake family and so . . ."

"Mrs. Shuttlecock, I'm sort of worried about Jillian," interrupted Max. "I'll go on up and see if she's home."

'She's not."

"Oh?"

"She," said the landlady, picking up a plastic bucket from the sundial top, "hasn't been home since last night, Mr. Kearny. I don't usually pry but when Mrs. Veblen's fireplace exploded late last evening I did have to knock on Jillian's door. The note."

Max was half way up the front stairs. "She left a note for me?" My god, he thought, Jillian's backed out. No, that's not a rational notion. Relax.

On my little catchall table," said Mrs. Shuttlecock.

Max dived into the hallway and sifted through the sprawl of mail. He spotted his name in Jillian's large cockeyed printing. She doesn't even know caps from lower case, Max thought. And then, but why isn't she here?

The letter said: "Wednesday aft. Max, in case you drop by tonight I might as well admit I'm doing something not too feminine and retiring. Don't be angry. I'm going over to Calder & Peppercorn and tell Knox to leave Ann alone. I don't want you, really Max, to get mixed up with him. I'll see you Thursday around 5 as per usual. Love, Jillian."

Dodging around Mrs. Shuttlecock on the path Max sent her yellow bucket spinning into the mist. "Sorry," he said, leaping the black gate and making for his car.

In the North Beach antique store a basilisk tried to stop him but Max always carried a charm against them on his key ring. The shop proprietor had jumped Max when he demanded to be let through the secret entrance to the Calder & Peppercorn offices. The fringe-haired old man weighed 200 pounds and he knocked Max' wind out falling on him. In a second Max knocked him out and jerked free.

He guessed the entrance to the phantom agency would be behind the black bead portiered archway just in back of the basilisk's pedestal. He jumped through and ran down a dark corridor. The corridor corkscrewed down and around and at its dim end was a large ebony desk with a bare chested man behind it. The guy was broad and bald, with gold rings in his ears and a spikey circular beard. There was a glossy raven perched on his in box. "Do you have an appointment?"

Max yanked the magic paperback out of his inside coat pocket and read off a few entry spells. For

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some reason the giant receptionist turned to stone. Max shrugged, dodged the now angry raven, and hit a door marked Private. He spun, found the release button under the desk edge.

This corridor looked like any other advertising agency. Grey carpets, grey walls. Offices and cubbyholes with half-glass doors. One of the art directors wore a peaked blue cap glazed with stars and planets. Aside from that Calder & Peppercorn could have been Max' agency.

He found Ann Upland at a desk on the second level down. "Max?" said the blonde, her hands dropping away from her typewriter keys. "How'd you get in here?"

"I turned your receptionist to stone. Have you seen Jillian?"

"No," said Ann, shaking her head. "She's not here now, is she?"

"Since yesterday," said Max, explaining about it.

Ann thumbed the space bar twice. "Peppercorn and Calder and Mr. Balamar and Don Artemus have been in conference all day, with smoke coming out from under the door. Could Jillian be in there?"

"She is a food consultant," said Max. "Which conference room are they in?"

"Down on the next level. It says Private Eyrie on the door." She paused. "Do you think you can help us, Max?"

"Yes," said Max, running.

The conference room was unlocked but a two headed snake lay across the door. Max countered it with a spell from a page one foot note.

The four men in the room looked grim. Jillian, sitting on the left of the conference table with a big smoking cauldron in front of her, looked sleepless. Max smiled. "You okay, Jillian?"

She nodded. "I'm sorry, Max. I thought I knew all Peppercorn's tricks. He's got some new spells from Bavaria. I'm under one now to stay here and whip them up an assortment of magic potions. They're making some pitches for new accounts and want all the help they can get."

"A potion," said a small square-faced man at the head of the table, "needs the woman's touch, Kearny. We are all glad to have Jillian back. Perhaps," he grinned, "she won't leave."

A plump man in his sixties, very manicured and lotioned looking, flicked a thick cigar and said, in a burred vaguely Southern voice, "I think we ought not to stand in the way of love, Knox."

"Love, Wilkie," replied the square-jawed little man, "we can make with a philtre."

Wilkie Calder sucked his cigar, pouted. "I think it should be put to a vote."

"I'm the major stock holder," said Peppercorn.

A Latin looking man with a five

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year old sport coat, gaptoothed and moustached, said, "The real problem is this fellow Kearny here who's barged in on our private cabal." This must be Balamar.

Meaning the lanky man with round eyeglasses was Don Artemus. He said, "I'm tired of nobody ever listening to me."

"You haven't said anything," pointed out Peppercorn.

"It's the theory behind your attitude," said Artemus, "which annoys me so."

"Okay," said Max. "I'm taking Jillian home. Right now."

"A toad," suggested Balamar. "I vote we turn Kearny into a toad."

"That's typical of your thought patterns," said Artemus. "Instead of pre-concepting you just barge in with triteness. We don't even have a consumer posture on this Conroy boy."

Max said, "Max Kearney. And I want my fiancee back."

"I like that toad idea," said Calder, apparently shifting sides. "But I'd buy a frog better."

"Frogs are toads," said Balamar, touching his moustache.

"No they're not," said Artemus. "Besides which, we used the frog thing on that space rep from the tarot company last week."

"I'm certain," said Peppercorn, "Kearny here could repel the more obvious spells. What I'd like to hear now is some fresh thinking on how to really hex this upstart."

"You're such a bastard," put in Jillian, flaking some dry leaves into the cauldron on the table before her. "Don't think I'm not interested, Max, but this damn spell compells me to keep at this witch's brew."

Max turned his back for a moment and carefully checked the Bavarian spell book. His fingers were thick feeling. He finally found what seemed a good counter spell. He slipped the book away and faced Jillian, incanting.

Jillian smiled, said "Hey!", pushed back from the conference table and then toppled the cauldron. The brew hissed and swirled across the table top, making an ugly grey-green falls as it cascaded into Don Artemus' lap.

Artemus yelled and jumped back. "Typical outcome of our lack of direct action."

"Let's use the frog spell quickly," said Balamar.

"I've been wondering," said Calder, "if frogs aren't too trite. I was about to suggest a wolf. It's traditional I grant but effective."

Artemus was hopping up and down. "Oh for pete's sake. What could be hokier than a wolf. Not to mention the fact that a wolf could attack us."

"Not if you're carrying our client's wolfbane with you as I notified you all to do in my last memo on the subject," said Calder.

Smiling, Peppercorn stood at the table head and carefully began to roll up his left sleeve. His cuff-

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links were silver coins and slow to detach.

"Max, look out," said Jillian. "He's about to strike."

Max grabbed out the spell book and turned to the index. He looked under long life but the first reference was to a plug for a Bavarian senior city.

Peppercorn's cufflink clattered onto the table top. His sleeve inched up. "Enough of Kearny," he said.

Max had found what he wanted. He made three signs in the air. Muttered Latin backwards. Said five phrases of old French.

Nothing happened. Peppercorn laughed.

"Max," cried Jillian, "you mispronounced the last line."

"Oops," said Max, shouting it again.

"It won't . . ." said Peppercorn. Then he was gone. His clothes collapsed onto his chair and a geyser of fine dust spouted up and drifted into nothing in the air conditioned room.

"Good gravy," said Artemus. "You made him old."

"He made me mad," said Max. "Come on, Jillian."

"See?" asked Balamar. "We should have done the frog spell right off."

"I suggested simply letting them go," said Calder, eyeing Max.

Jillian took Max' hand and they left the conference room. On the next level they collected Ann Upland.

Ann's invisibility spells did not recur. She got a new job within three days. And in just over a week Max and Jillian were married by Reverend Allan, who thought they were both acrobats.

COMING NEXT MONTH . . .

. . . is our 16th Anniversary All-Star issue, in which we promise some welcome diversion in the form of stories by **AVRAM DAVIDSON, ROBERT F. YOUNG, JAMES BLISH,** and **ROGER ZELAZNY.** As an added special feature, we will publish a short but provocative Russian article on U. S. Science Fiction—along with rejoinders by **RAY BRADBURY, ISAAC ASIMOV, MACK REYNOLDS** and **POUL ANDERSON.** Look for the October issue, on sale August 31.

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BOOKS

AFTER SIX MONTHS OF WRIGgling around in the Reviewer's Chair, looking for a comfortable position, and after reading the truly impressive response to the request for readers' opinions published in the June issue, I have arrived at the following conclusions:

1) There is no comfort to be had in a seat of judgement.

2) For articulateness, interest, individualism, and diversity of firm opinions, I will back the readers of *F&SF* against any other publication in the country.

My third conclusion hardly merits a numbered listing, since it is neither quite mine, nor at all conclusive. It came out of the mailbox, with a note from Ed (the Ed.) saying, "We've had quite a response on the book column. I think the enclosed pretty much sums up the whole thing." The enclosed was a letter from Charles Landis of Austin, Texas, from which the following excerpts are lifted:

> . . . longer essays are wanted . . . the field needs that insight into itself which only the deeper analysis can provide . . . But on the other hand, it would be nice to keep the short reviews. They are invaluable as "buying guides." . . . In short, then, I think the experiment was itself the solution. Mix them up, give her a free hand, and do whatever is appropriate to the subject matter.

I am, of course, delighted to comply.

Ideally, I should be delighted to comply with *all* the requests that were made. Practically, three major factors make this unlikely: space, time, and publishers: space, because Ed (the Ed.) is reluctant to use half the magazine (and editorial budget) for reviews; time, because I simply do not read that fast; publishers, because the books actually received for review represent, at a guess, something less than 50% of the total of s-f book publishing.

Mrs. Irene Gitomer, Director of the Cherry Hill, N.J. Free Public Library, wrote perhaps the most eloquent plea for the wide-coverage "readers' guide" sort of column, including the interesting statistic that

> . . . only about fifteen per cent of the books published annually

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ever get reviewed. For a special interest type of writing such as SF, I am sure the percentage is a good deal smaller.

Actually, I think it is much higher—even from a viewpoint as inclusive as mine about what constitutes s-f. I'd guess that we come close to covering half of the *new* releases.

I stressed *new* releases. One of the more interesting points made by several correspondents was emphasized in a letter from A. Wm. Harding, of Willowdale, Ontario:

> . . . Also we suggest that you include reviews of older books as well as new. We remind you that there is still business done in the second-hand stores and in the private and public libraries. The older books are cherished by many of us, as your pages have often shown . . .

And Mrs. Frederick Avila of Denver, Colorado, followed a long and interesting letter to the Editor with a second one to the Reviewer, discussing (in connection with WHITE LOTUS) two other books she had read recently, which made me yearn to be able to redo the Hersey review in a more inclusive and discursive way.

I wish there were time and space here (This time, I can't blame anything on the publishers.) to quote more fully from the mail received. But it is more to the point to answer it, I think, by explaining some of the factors influencing the scope and type of review I can or cannot do here, and why.

For instance, the matter of "books received"—or *not* received. Because of this magazine's reputation for literary and intellectual quality (I assume) we receive a number of books (primarily nonfiction) of only the most peripheral interest to most s-f readers. I believe these should be, at least, mentioned: partly because we do have an unusual range of readers, some of whom *will* be interested, no matter how esoteric the field; and partly, I admit, to encourage the publishers of these volumes to keep sending books, because some of the others will be of wider interest.

On the other hand, there are still a fair number of "snob publishers" who will not allow themselves to believe that *their* books (especially when a Name Author is involved) have any connection with *science fiction*. Others, apparently, do not maintain specialty review lists for the *genre*. Of the thirty-seven books reviewed by me in my first six columns, two (Nathan and Golding, in April) were from the public library; two were supplied, only *on request*, by the publishers (Christopher, April; Burroughs, May); and three were purchased (Kennaway, April; Hersey, June; Clarke, July).

Now everyone knows that book

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reviewing, though notoriously underpaid, is attractive because of the basic fringe benefit—the books themselves. I am willing, on occasion, to forego this privilege, and to report on a book I have begged, borrowed, stolen, or even bought; but I feel it is only fair, before going to such extremes, to allow the publisher an opportunity to remedy his oversight. By the time I *know* about such books, however, and write to ask for them—

Well, look at it this way: the *fastest* time for publication of a review in this column is about three months from the time the book is in my hands. (Average time is closer to four.) And frankly, the reviews are better when they are slower; (I seem to have a mind like a centrifuge; if I just pour the stuff in, and let it spin around, it sorts itself out fairly reliably. My instant opinions are more likely to be simply scrambled. But aside from my mental idiosyncracies—)

Magazine reviewing is slow at best. It is simply not possible for a column like this to serve as a truly effective shopping guide for new books. And from my personal knowledge of s-f readers, I think Mr. Harding's point was well-taken: they *do* patronize second-hand stores and libraries; furthermore, they will go out and *order* books no longer in stock, and make special requests at libraries for books not on the shelves.

I can, however, make an effort to be more inclusive—and readers can help. If you notice books you'd like to see reviewed, let us know. Those not already on hand, we will make an effort to get. Anything worth reading will *still* be worth reading when the review finally appears. In addition—

We will, at regular intervals, if not in each column, publish the fullest possible listings of books published but not reviewed—whether new, reprinted, or reissued; and of such titles as you-all out there bring to our attention, if they are not otherwise discussed here.

As to the form of the reviews themselves, I know no more ahead of time than you do. I hope they will be "appropriate to the subject matter." They will, in any case, be written in full accord with the comment of another letter-writer, Ed Brenner, of Brooklyn, N.Y.:

> . . . It is, after all, her opinions that are going down in print. Even in this age when we are not held accountable for our actions, we should be accountable for our opinions—especially our vocal ones.

And before I get down to the job for this month, let me thank (however anonymously and collectively) those of you who saw fit to be generous with your praise. I approached this job more timorously than may seem probable for a Seasoned Old Pro; it has been very gratifying to know that some

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of you are well pleased . . . as gratifying as it is to know that Ed (the Ed.) also supports such views as those expressed by correspondents Landis and Brenner.

I am rather pleased to report that nothing on this month's list excited me much. (Bad show, you know, for a critic to be uncritical, and I have been bouncing with enthusiasm, it seems to me, for months now.) Mostly standard fare, with three new novels providing an interesting contrast in terms of the number of ways a book can fall short of excellence and yet remain well-readable.

NOT WITH A BANG, **Chapman Pincher**; NAL-World, 1965, $4.95, 248 pp.

This is a first novel by a British zoologist-turned-journalist, who worked on weapons development for the army during World War Two, and is now, according to the book jacket, "noted especially for his political reporting. He has written seven books on subjects ranging from fish to animal breeding and evolution."

All this is, for once, very much pertinent. Writing about the effects of the discovery of a longevity drug, Pincher clearly demonstrates his knowledge, not only of laboratories, council halls, and city rooms, but of the individuals who inhabit them. Unhappily, his lack of background in fiction is just as much in evidence.

The book moves clumsily, but convincingly. The shift from recognizable authenticity of background to authoritatively extrapolated scenes and events is accomplished particularly effectively. The stream of events, affecting individuals and nations alike, has the feeling of reportage rather than invention.

The only thing the books lacks entirely is emotional involvement. The characters are perceptively visualized and meaningfully inter-related; but one never quite attains that sense of identification without which the best-constructed and most clearly drawn characters remain just that—characters, and not people. In this case, "subjects" might be the better word: the technique is more that of the case-history writer than the storyteller.

The book is well worth reading, and judging by the author's demonstrated keenness as an observer, and from the excellence of those aspects of technique with which he *is* familiar, I suspect this is the only amateurishly-written novel Mr. Pincher will publish. If there is another, it will probably be very good.

Meantime, a black mark against NAL-World for the common publishers' conceit that has done more to lower the level of s-f than any other cause: the smug assumption

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that style is superfluous in a "category" book. I cannot help but feel that a more demanding editor would have elicited a much better novel.

DARE, **Philip Jose Farmer**; Ballantine, 1965, 50¢, 159 pp.

This time I cannot blame the publisher. Farmer has demonstrated, on too few occasions, what he *can* do (cf, THE ALLEY MAN, F&SF, June 1959), when he elects to provide appropriate care and cultivation for his extraordinary inventiveness, intuition, and imagination. More often, as here, his work is so casual as to be embarrassing in its obviously unnecessary inadequacies. Yet I find that while I rail at the sloppiness on every page, I keep turning the pages—eagerly.

This time we have a plot out of *Planet Stories* by Charles Fort, which might be allright in its way, if it were not abruptly cut off in the middle (well, maybe two-thirds or three-quarters through), and hastily synopsized in the last few pages—peopled by colorful cardboards cut right out of the book club ads for historical novels. But we also have, in scene after scene, Farmer's uniquely sensory scene-setting: the vivid colors, pungent odors, sensations of sun and grass and wood and metal, awareness of food and drink and sex and pain. And more significantly, we have the Farmer symbols.

There *are* other writers with the kind of direct-line Phil Farmer seems to have to the collective unconscious—but few indeed who can disport themselves so mirthfully with the archetypal shapes. The major stream of symbolism this time has to do with a submerged race (literally, of course; they live underground) whose (literal) sexual superiority is demonstrated (to begin with) in their name, *Horstels*, from horse-tails, from, of course, their (literal) tails. And that's only the beginning . . .

THE POSSESSORS, **John Christopher**; Simon & Schuster, 1964, $4.50, 252 pp.

The only thing missing here is meaning. Beautifully structured, artfully written, thoughtfully and successfully characterized, this still boils down to a story of devils-and-zombies decked out as aliens-and-victims. (One part of *Who Goes There?*, two parts of PUPPET MASTERS), with not enough freshness, scientific plausibility, *or* superstitious terror to make it work. Easy reading, for train trips and hammock afternoons.

GALACTIC DIPLOMAT, **Keith Laumer**; Doubleday, 1965, $3.95, 227 pp.

Nine of the "Retief" stories from *If* magazine: farce-toned

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tales of the *Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne* of the space-expanding future. The C.D.T., as caricature, rings as wryly true as its counterparts in Lawrence Durrell's present-time fantasy-farce "Antrobus" series. I cannot even say that Durrell's touch is any more deft or delicate with the satiric strokes than (fellow-ex-diplomat) Laumer's: I find the brush a bit broad for my taste, increasingly, in *both* series.

Maybe what jars me most in the Retief yarns is Retief himself—such a fine figure of a fellow, full of moral and intellectual, as well as muscular and social virtues—that I never can quite believe he is *still* with the C.D.T. when the next story starts. Maybe merit does not necessarily imply rejection in the diplomatic employ, but this particular heroic figure has humor *besides*. If the *Corps* didn't cashier him, Retief would long since have cashed in his chips for himself.

And I can't help wishing that Laumer would take his own abilities more seriously. (See *F&SF*, March, on THE GREAT TIME MACHINE HOAX.) His rare excursions into non-farcical fiction—or even the misplaced hero, Retief—indicate the likelihood of a heroic writer under the gimcracks. Slapstick is great garnish for the *hors d'oeuvres*, or maybe even the dessert; but a well-done hero is still the meat-and-potatoes of literary fare—and there are simply not enough of them to go around, these anti-novel days.

NATIVES OF SPACE, Hal Clement; Ballantine, 1965, 50¢, 156 pp.

It is not easy to persuade a commercial publisher to bring out a collection of short stories—and only slightly less difficult to sell a trio or quartet of novelettes. I suppose it should not be surprising, then, that so many of the collections that do get published appear to have been selected by literary historians rather than working editors. The unreconstructed evidence of the quarter-century-ago pulp apprenticeship of a man who has since become a skillful writer has very little place in the general fiction market, and less, I should think, on the overcrowded paperback stacks.

(What really astonishes me is the willingness of the authors themselves to have their early magazine work presented without refinishing to the bookreading public.)

Don't get me wrong. Every one of these three stories ("Impediment," "Technical Error," "Assumption Unjustified," all from *Astounding*, 1942-43-46) contains the same inherent integrity (of puzzle, plot, character, theme, technical background) that has sustained Clement at the top of the field from the beginning. The difference is that on the way he also learned to *write*.

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As it stands, the book is for solid s-f buffs only.

SLEEPING PLANET, **William R. Burkett, Jr.**; Doubleday, 1965, $4.95, 297 pp.

Goodish standard-brand *Analog*-type novel: a double-handful of unaffected Terrestrials beat off the sleeping-gas invasion of Earth by the Llralan Empire, countering overwhelming military force with yankee ingenuity, rebel stubbornness, bulldog courage, outback unpredictability, and a little bit o' luck for good measure (mostly in the form of the superstitious ancestor-worship prevalent among the cosmic invaders).

The odd thing is, as long as its at all competently done (and this one is), I keep right on enjoying this story.

CITY UNDER THE SEA, **Paul W. Fairman**; Pyramid, 1965, 50¢, 141 pp. The "novelization" of ABC-TV's "Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea." I found both the smoothly professional style and the Chestertonian flavor of the material agreeable—but ill-suited to each other.

SUBSPACE EXPLORERS, **Edward E. Smith**; Canaveral Press, 1965, $4.95, 278 pp. Grand Ole Space Opry. Not my dish of tea, but them as likes 'em *loves* 'em, when "Doc" Smith is at the controls.

TO WORLDS BEYOND, **Robert Silverberg**; Chilton, 1965, $3.95, 170 pp. (9 shorts) & intro by Isaac Asimov. Good standard stuff. (See F&SF, March on REGAN'S PLANET.) I liked "The Overlord's Thumb" and "Ozymandias"; others —"The Old Man," "New Men for Mars," "Collecting Team," "Double Dare," "Certainty," "Mind for Business," "Misfit."

ANALOG 3, ED. **John W. Campbell**; Doubleday, 1965, $4.50, 269 pp. (8 novelettes), and intro. Medium-to-excellent selections from *Analog*, 1963-65. "Hilifter," Gordon R. Dickson; "Not in the Literature," Christopher Anvil; "Sonny," Rick Raphael; "The Trouble with Telstar," John Berryman; "New Folks' Home," Clifford D. Simak; "Industrial Revolution," Winston P. Sanders; "A World by the Tale," Seaton McKettrig; "Thin Edge," Jonathan Blake MacKenzie. My favorites: Raphael, Simak, McKettrig.

EXILES OF TIME, **Nelson Bond**; Paperback Library, 1965, 50¢, 157 pp. Resurrected, but unreconstructed (see comments on Clement, above) from 1940 magazine (*Bluebook?*) publication.

MEMOIRS OF ROBERT-HOUDIN, **King of the Conjurors**, translated from the French by **Lascelles Wraxall**, with an introduction and notes by Milbourne Christopher; Dover,

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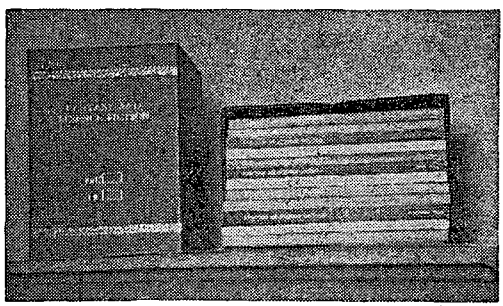
1964, $2.00; 304 pp. and introduction, appendix, notes, and index. Diagrams, drawings, and photographs lend some liveliness to a Victorian-style autobiography.

HAWTHORNE'S FICTION: **The Light and the Dark, Richard Harter Fogle**; University of Oklahoma Press, 1964; $5.00; 234 pp. and index. Scholarly analysis of Hawthorne's work. —JUDITH MERRIL

CORRECTION: A missing line at the bottom of the second column on p. 78 of the July issue resulted in a major misquote from Kurt Vonnegut's book, GOD BLESS YOU, MR. ROSEWATER. The line, "God damn it, you've got to be kind," appears, as printed, to be the last line in the book. It's actually from the middle of the novel, and should have had a line saying so to precede it. My most sincere apologies. JM



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Ray Nelson's first story, TURN OFF THE SKY (August 1963) provoked as much comment (90% delighted, the rest incensed) as any story we have recently published. His second appearance was EIGHT O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING (November 1963), a vivid horror story which Judith Merril includes in THE 9TH ANNUAL OF THE YEAR'S BEST SF. The story below is about a programmer of music computers, the setting is the Florence of our technological age, Chicago—and beyond that it is indescribable. Except that it does bear certain parallels with our feelings upon first hearing a recording of "Music By Computers"—it is eerie, frightening, funny, distinctive, and Something To Think About.

THE GREAT COSMIC DONUT OF LIFE

by Ray Nelson

ONE DAY I DECIDED TO SEE IF I could program Mr. M, the company music computer, to improvise jazz exactly like Charlie Parker. It shouldn't be too hard, I thought.

Now, five years and one hundred and twenty-five unsuccessful programs later, I slip another Parker program into the Read-Unit, set the switches for Compose and Replay, then settle back with a plate of donuts to see if maybe I have done it at last.

Knock-knock-knock-knock.

That's my wife's secret knock sounding on the door. I press the stud and the door slides open.

"Notice anything different about me?" she cries as she sweeps in.

"My God! You've had your hair dyed again! Purple! What was wrong with blonde with metallic silver streaks? Or before that, with fire-engine red, or . . ."

"Calm down, darling. The worst is yet to come."

"Yipe! Green eyes! You've changed the pigmentation of your eyes even!"

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"Isn't it positively narcissistic? I'm the first girl in our block twisted enough to try it. It's the very latest thing, very depraved!"

Suddenly the computer starts playing imitation Charlie Parker. It's still not true Parker, I think to myself. Damn! I switch it off.

She plunks herself down in my lap and bites my ears, my throat, my donut. "I love you, you swine," she says.

"Save some of the donut for me, Debbie! Don't eat it all!"

"I'll give you the best part, King Mo, from the very center."

"That's just the hole!"

"The hole is the spiritual part," she says, eating.

Another knock at the door.

Debbie opens it and lets in a tall, awkward man with drooping black mustaches. "My God," I say to myself. "He looks like a silent movie villain. I wonder if I am expected to hiss and boo a little, out of politeness."

"Mo," says Debbie, "I want you to meet my good friend, Harley Quinn. He steals things. Harley, this is my husband, Mohammed Smith."

We shake hands cautiously.

I try to make small talk but he stops me by raising his finger to his lips and whispering, "You're sure we can't be overheard?"

"What? Why-er-no," I reply uneasily.

"Your wife thought you might be interested in this." He takes out a spool of recording tape. "It's pure Charlie Parker, recorded by an amateur hi-fi bug one night at Minton's. It's never been put on record, but it's Parker at his greatest. All the other big bop people are there, too. Fifteen solid minutes of the finest jazz ever played."

"Where'd you get it?"

He grins toothily.

"That would be telling, wouldn't it?" he says in a sinister voice.

He puts his tape on my recorder and plays it. It's the real stuff, all right. Like, wow! When the tape is finished I have only one question.

"How much do you want for it, Mister Quinn?"

"Two thousand credits, Mister Smith." He let that sink in.

"Now look here, Quinn, if my wife told you all about me, as it seems she has, you must know I haven't got that kind of money. I'm just a poor electronics technician and . . ."

"I know you haven't got it," he breaks in, "but I also know you can get it."

"How?"

He smiles at Debbie. She smiles back. They look like a pair of Cheshire cats.

"Well," he says, "you just dub this tape here onto another tape and take it to the record company and tell them you made it with your composing machine. If you go to a certain Mr. Youngdahl, he'll either pay you two thousand

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credits to burn the tape so as not to bring down the price of the Parker records he already has for sale, or he'll buy it for that price with the idea of selling it to the public as real Parker. The joke will be on him . . . he'll never know he's telling the truth."

Debbie giggles. Quinn smiles wickedly. I stare blankly. There is a long expectant silence, broken only by the sound of Quinn eating my last donut.

"I don't know," I say at last. "I just don't know. What if we get caught?"

"Impossible!" says Quinn. "And even if we do get caught, the power of society over us is subject to one serious limitation." He draws himself up proudly. "That is our ability to escape punishment by killing ourselves."

"Very comforting." I force a smile.

"Anyway, Mister Smith, we won't get caught. How can we?"

I still don't feel quite right about it, but I say, "Okay, Quinn. You win. I'll do it."

The next day I call in sick and take the tube downtown. Of course when I get to the record company I find Mr. Youngdahl is out and won't be back until two and even then I'll have to have an appointment. I should have thought of that before, but somehow my head just doesn't seem to be running right today. I check and see if I have the tape with me. Answer? No. I have a tape, but it's the wrong one. The right one must still be in my office at work, but how can I get it if I've already told the front office I'm sick? All of a sudden I *do* feel a little ill. The tube ride to my office building doesn't help my stomach a bit . . . that awful accelleration and decelleration.

Sweating like a madman, I slip around in back and sneak up the back stairs. Nobody takes the stairs if the elevators are running, so I get into the company stockroom without being seen. Trying to look casual. I stride quickly to the door of my office and let myself in. The first thing I see is that the Parker tape is not in its box. Good Lord! Where is it then? I start searching desperately when suddenly the door opens and George Whitman, one of the boys from the Sales Department, comes in.

"It's a good thing you showed up after all," he says heartily. "Feeling better? We've got a rush order for a hit old-time rock and roll style tune . . . something nostalgic, you know. I'll call up the agent and tell him we can do the job after all. Seems his nephew is going on nineteen years old and hasn't had a hit record yet, for the love of Mike!"

"You got the words?" I ask, hoping to get the job done and off my back as quickly as possible.

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"Right here," says George. He tosses a typewritten sheet on my desk and turns to leave.

"Say, by the way," I call after him, "What happened to the tape that was in this box here?"

"Oh that! Well, the boys in the sales department wanted to send birthday greetings to this agent's nephew, see. They played a little of the tape and it was just some old-fashioned jazz very badly recorded, so they erased it and recorded 'Happy Birthday' over it."

He goes out whistling "Happy Birthday" while I stare after him, dumbfounded. With fumbling fingers I set up the program for the rock and roll song and push the "start" button, then weave across the room and dig into my file of tape recordings. Maybe some of the tapes of fake Parker I've made will sound good enough.

Well, what's this?

Fifteen minutes of variations of the chord for "Indiana". That might do it. And here's a fragment of "Cherokee". I put them on the tape recorder and listen to a few bars of each. You know, they just might pass. I'll tell this Youngdahl person it's synthetic music, made by an electronic computer, and by God it'll even be the truth!

When I get off work I make my way to the nearest phone booth and call home. Nobody answers but the answering machine.

"Mrs. Smith is with Mr. Quinn at the Johnsons," it says. "Mr. Smith is requested to meet her there."

The Johnsons are more Debbie's friends than mine. All I know about them is that they are a normal family of Wayites; two wives, three husbands and a Martian Globbly.

I buzz the Johnsons' doorbell. After a pause the door slides open and I enter. Even though their house is a log cabin on the outside, on the inside it is a Roman bath. The five Johnsons, my wife, and Harley Quinn are all dressed in identical pseudo-Roman white nylon tricot tunics that look well on the females but rather silly on the males.

"Hi, everybody," I say weakly, setting down my tapes and sheet music. "Have you got one of those things for me?"

"Sure," someone replies. Too bad, I think; I had sort of hoped they wouldn't.

When I am dressed in one of the absurd things and seated on one of the low couches, the little Martian Globbly comes scrambling across the floor and jumps into my lap. It's the first time I have ever seen a creature from another planet up close, so I examine it carefully. It is pink and hairless and very warm to the touch, and one of the Johnsons informs me that on Mars it would be cov-

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ered by thick fur, but here it is so warm the fur is shed as fast as it grows. The Globbly's body is round and fat and it has huge lungs and short, stubby legs. The head is so much an integral part of the body that it seems to have no neck at all.

"That," says Harley Quinn contemptuously, "is the highest form of life on Mars."

The Globbly nods with an air of infinite resignation.

"Why, it seems to understand what you say!" I observe with surprise.

The elder of the female Johnsons smiles.

"Not really," she says. "It is almost deaf in our audio range, though it can hear clearly higher pitched sounds that we can't hear at all, like dog whistles. It understands you by extra-sensory perception."

"Telepathy?"

"Telempathy is the word they use, I think. Whatever you feel, it feels too. That's why it makes such a good pet. It's so sympathetic. The poor critter just can't stand to see any living thing suffering or in pain. It's highly intelligent, too. It can imitate human gestures and facial expressions so well that sometimes you almost forget it's only an animal."

The Globbly grins proudly, leaps out of my lap and scampers up the wall to dangle by its hind feet from the ceiling.

"It has suction disks on its feet and hands," says Debbie, thumbing her nose at it. "Frightfully agile, in spite of being so fat."

"You must be basically a loving, gentle person," says one of the Johnsons to me as the Globbly runs down the wall and leaps back into my lap. "The Globbly is always attracted to the most gentle, loving person in a group."

One of the other Johnson women takes what looks like a ball-point pen and touches it to the back of her head, then shudders violently, turns pale and lets out a long drawn-out moan of pleasure. I then notice that all the Johnsons have similar little pen-like objects on cords around their necks. One of the Johnson men touches his pen to what seems to be a tiny electrode in his head and he too shudders, turns pale and moans softly with pleasure. Even the Globbly moans and shudders, though he has no pen of his own.

"I hope you won't think I'm asking personal questions," I say, asking a personal question, "but what are those things you keep touching your heads with?"

"Oh, these," he answers brightly. "These are just little tubes with batteries inside. When we touch them to the electrodes in our heads a tiny electric shock goes down a wire into the pleasure centers of our brains. You have no idea how wonderful it feels!"

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"You should really have one put in," says one of the wives.

I shudder. The Globbly strokes my hand sympathetically.

Just then the robot cart rolls in from the kitchen carrying a fabulous supper, and conversation ceases for the moment as we all attack the food like a pack of hungry wolves. After a while I excuse myself to go to the bathroom and on my way back I look in the closet to see if my tapes and music are all right. They are still sitting there, right where one of my hosts put them, and right beside them sits Harley Quinn's briefcase. Suddenly I have a brilliant idea.

I open Harley Quinn's briefcase and, sure enough, there is a roll of recording tape. I can just switch tapes with Harley and recopy the original Parker, then go on with the original plan the way it was before I got things so mixed up.

No sooner said than done.

As I enter the room again only the Globbly looks up. That little critter knows I've been up to something alright, but fortunately it can't talk. Then it winks at me.

Everyone is still eating, but now and then the Johnsons pause to give themselves a little electric jolt. Finally Debbie leans back with a sigh.

"That sure was great," she says. "Just like what they really must have had in those delightfully decadent last days of the Roman Empire."

"Sure was," I agree. "What was that meat course, anyway? I've never tasted anything like it."

"Toadburgers," says one of the wives modestly.

I suddenly feel the need for a little fresh air.

"I've had an awfully hard day," I say, holding down my supper with some effort. "I think I'd better be (burp) running on home."

I get up and stumble to the closet to get my tapes and music. One of the Johnsons comes after me and presses a big book into my hands. It is titled in old fashioned gold letters, "The Theory of Expansive Love" by Theodore E. White.

"Read this," he says. "Then you'll understand that group marriage is really the way men and women were meant to live."

A few blocks away from the Johnsons' place I feel suddenly cold and glance down at myself.

"My God," I whisper. "I'm still wearing that white nylon tunic!"

The tunic only covers my body from my pelvis to my shoulders, leaving my bony goose-pimpled arms and legs naked to the icy night breeze. I hadn't noticed it before, but the tunic bears a sickeningly close resemblance to a lady's slip. I see a police aircar approaching and dive into the nearest doorway.

I huddle there in terror as the aircar whooshes overhead and disappears over the rooftops. Sudden-

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ly there is a rustle up the street. Somebody is coming!

I peer apprehensively in the direction of the noise.

Oh no! It's a pair of pants and a suit jacket sliding along the sidewalk with nobody inside them! Wait! There is somebody inside them. It's the Globbly!

The Globbly creeps out of the pile of clothing and, with a deep bow, bids me put the pants and coat on. He doesn't have to ask me twice.

When I am safely dressed I thank the Globbly from the bottom of my heart.

"I'll never forget this," I say, kissing the little creature on the top of his bold pink head. "Now run along home before the Johnsons find out you're gone. I don't want you to get into trouble on my account."

I turn and stroll away in rather high spirits, for me.

About a block later I see, out of the corner of my eye, that the Globbly is following me. I turn around and confront him.

"Go on home, little feller. Your family will be looking for you."

He gazes up at me with heartbreaking Cocker Spaniel sorrow in his big blue eyes.

"Go on, will you? You'll only make trouble for both of us."

A tear forms in his eye and rolls down his cheek.

"Oh for God's sake, don't be such a baby!"

Another tear.

"Oh all right! I can take you back to the Johnsons tomorrow."

The Globbly is all glee now, running wildly in circles around me and squeaking with joy. I resume my march, smiling in spite of myself at his antics. As we reach the subway entrance he leaps up onto my shoulder and remains there until we get home.

Next morning, with the Globbly still riding happily on my shoulder, I take the tube downtown and soon find myself in the reception room of Mr. Youngdahl's office.

"Oh," cries Mr. Youngdahl's secretary, peering at the Globbly through her triangular horn-rimmed glasses, "what a cute adorable little thing! Can I hold him?"

"Sure. You can watch out for him while I'm in Mr. Youngdahl's office." This time she doesn't even mention the need for an appointment.

The Globbly jumps up on her desk and lies down on her blotter while she tickles his tummy with a long red fingernail.

"Kitchy-kitchy-coo," she says, giggling.

"Squeeeeee!" says the Globbly, kicking his feet furiously in the air.

Another woman enters the office, sees the Globbly and runs out again. She returns almost immediately with a whole pack of other

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women. Eagerly they crowd around, struggling with each other for a chance to tickle the Globbly's belly-button.

"Oh, isn't he sweet?"

"Look at those big blue eyes!"

"Don't you just love him?" they simper.

Just then the door to the inner office opens and Mr. Youngdahl peers out. For a few moments he stares at the scene of utter confusion, a black thundercloud of a frown slowly gathering on his brow, then roars, *"What the Hell is going on here anyway?"*

Instantly the women scatter, stampeding out the door like a flock of squawking, clucking frightened chickens.

"And who the Hell are you?" he snarls to me.

"I'm Mohammed Smith of the Autócomp Music Co. I've been working on a program for our music computer that will make it play just like Charlie Parker. I thought you might be interested in buying some of the tapes I've made. This is in strictest confidence, you know. My employers mustn't ever hear about it."

He looks me over suspiciously.

"Okay, come on in," he says finally. "I'll listen to your tapes, but they just better be good! Leave that damn creature outside. He's caused enough trouble already."

We enter his office and he slams the door behind us. With nervous shaking fingers I try to put my spool of tape on Mr. Youngdahl's machine, but it slips out of my hands and falls to the floor, rolling between Mr. Youngdahl's legs and unwinding as it goes.

"Sorry, sir," I mumble as I stumble after it. It rolls under Mr. Youngdahl's desk and I have to get down on my hands and knees to retrieve it.

"Just a minute, Mr. Youngdahl," I say, rewinding it onto the spool. As you might expect, it keeps getting snarled, but I finally get it all rewound and put it on the machine. Somehow, though, I just can't seem to get it threaded.

"I haven't got all day, Smith! Let me do that!"

He shoves me impatiently away from the machine and soon has it started. For a moment I'm afraid that it might be the wrong tape, but no, there's the crowd noise, alright.

Suddenly, in the midst of the noise I hear my little wife Debbie shriek, "Harley, you old rascal! Stop that!"

"Heh heh heh," says Harley.

I reach for the switch to turn it off, but Mr. Youngdahl brushes my hand away. "Keep your mitts off my machine," he growls. "You'll bust it."

On the tape Debbie says, "This is Debbie Smith . . ."

". . . and this is Harley Quinn," says Harley.

". . . and we're recording this tape as a little souvenir of the

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Carter family's one hundred and seventh wedding reception. This time the entire Langdon family is joining with them in holy matrimony. That means that the marriage now contains more than three hundred people, not including children. Not bad, eh Harley?"

"That's what I call 'Togetherness', Debbie."

There is a crash and a chorus of shouts.

"Looks more like an orgy than a reception to *me*," laughs Harley. "I wonder what that dumb cluck of a husband of yours would say if he could see you now?"

"Oh, *him!* That creep! Who cares what he'd say? Shut up and kiss me or I'll claw your eyes out."

For a frightfully long time there is nothing but the sound of the crowd whooping it up in the background . . . screams, breaking glass, music, then Debbie speaks.

"Hey now, Harl. Where did you learn to kiss like that?"

Click.

Mr. Youngdahl switches off the machine and turns on me, livid with rage.

"This little joke is going to cost you your job, Mr. Smith. I'm going to call your employer right now and tell him just what I think of your twisted sense of humor."

He picks up the phone and dials the Autocomp Music Co.

"No, don't do that!" I plead.

Just then the Globbly bursts in and flings himself on Mr. Youngdahl like a wildcat.

"Hey! Help! Yow! Stop that!" screams Mr. Youngdahl.

I pick up the tape and my papers and run for it, the Globbly close behind. I run headlong into Mr. Youngdahl's secretary, knocking her flat on her pretty posterior and sending her triangular glasses flying. Down the stairs I leap, five steps at a time, then pause at street level for the Globbly to catch up and jump on my shoulder, before starting off at a brisk walk.

"You little idiot," I snap at the Globbly. "Why did you have to attack Mr. Youngdahl? Now he'll not only have me fired, but he'll call the police on us, too."

The Globbly hangs his head in shame.

A police aircar swoops overhead and lands on the roof of Mr. Youngdahl's office building.

"You see?" I tell the Globbly. "Our only chance is to hide out in the abandoned slum district . . . and we might as well stay there. There's nothing left for us here in the outside world."

When we reach the river that separates the Loop district from the slums of the Near North Side I pause a moment, glancing around, then start creeping across a ruined bridge. We are only halfway across when I look up and see a police aircar coming, fast.

"Can you swim?" I ask.

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He shakes his head.

"Then you crawl across and meet me on the other side," I say, then I stuff my tape and papers into my shirt and dive into the river. I swim underwater as far as I can, then finally have to come up for air. The police aircar is hovering not far away and two cops are chasing the Globbly back and forth, up and down, over the twisted metal and broken stone of the ruined bridge.

"Good luck, little critter," I murmur, as I take a deep breath and dive again, but when I rise to the surface again in the shadow of the buildings on the opposite shore, I see that they have got him.

Old Chicago! I've heard about this place so many times . . . seen postcards of it and read lurid stories about it, but even though I've lived in Chicago all my life this is the first time I've ever seen it with my own eyes. Nothing but empty streets and half-ruined buildings as far as I can see in every direction.

I search the sky for police skycars once more, then, seeing none, I get my direction from the sun and set off walking briskly down the center of the street. It isn't hard to believe that people left this part of Chicago, just as they left the residential sections of all the big cities when improved transportation made it possible for them to live in the country. What is hard to believe is that they ever did actually live like this . . . so close together they almost had their elbows in each other's soup.

Suddenly I pull up short, staring at my feet.

A campfire.

Still smoking a little.

Boy Scouts?

I don't think so, somehow. I start walking faster, fighting the impulse to break into a run. A cat dashes into the street, cowers a moment, hissing and spitting at me, then scuttles into the broken window of a building across the street.

I hurry onward, my water-soaked shoes going squnch-squnch in the silence.

What's that noise?

So distant I can hardly make it out, but after a moment I realize what it is. What else could it be but wild dogs? There it is again, louder. Barking. Must be a hundred of them from the sound of it. They're getting closer. Must have picked up my trail.

What'll I do?

The barking is getting pretty loud back there behind me. I turn and glance back. No dogs yet.

"Help!" I call. "Save me! The dogs are coming!"

Damn echo.

I glance back again. Oh oh, here they come! Maybe eight or ten blocks behind but running like they were chasing a mechanical rabbit. What a mob of dogs! Every

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size and kind of mongrel God and the Devil could cook up between them!

In desperation I dash up the cement steps of a collapsing tenement building and slam the door behind me. The hinges look too rusty to hold. I grab an old cabinet and, with more strength than I would have believed I had, I shove it against the door. That'll hold'um off for a while, anyway.

What's this? The cellar door! My God, they'll come at me through the cellar. There's an old overstuffed chair in the front apartment. I haul it out and slam it against the cellar door.

The dogs hit the front door like a battering ram, yelping, snapping, howling like all the demons in Hell. It gives a little, but holds, thank God. They're outside now, milling around, looking for a way in, sniffing, pawing. I go to the window of the front apartment to have a look. They see me, start leaping for the window. Just a little too high for you, you bloodthirsty monsters! Spoke too soon. Here's one got his front paws over the sill, writhing to catch his balance. I pick up a black two-by-four from the floor and jab him in the chest. He wiggles to one side, biting at the two-by-four, and keeps trying to come in. I hit him. He howls but keeps struggling. I hit him again and again and again. Another dog leaping up to grab the window sill grabs him instead, and the two of them fall together to the sidewalk. Here comes another one. I lay into him with all my strength and he too drops to the sidewalk. They stop jumping and stare up at me growling and snarling, a sea of red eyes and fangs and lolling tongues. Doesn't look like they're going to jump any more. I'll try to slip out the back way.

I grope into the darkness of the interior. I try a door, but the handle comes off in my hand. I bend over and peer through the handle-hole. There's the back porch and a fence and the alley beyond. I throw my weight against the door. Once again. Suddenly it gives way and I lurch out onto the back porch. The rotten wood collapses under my feet and I fall through, plunging through space a moment, then landing with a stunning thud in the cellar. I try to move. Can't. The world is turning, turning, turning. I hope I haven't broken any bones.

The dogs can get in through the cellar windows! I try to move again. Succeed. I try to get to my feet, almost faint. In a few seconds the dogs will get my scent . . . a few seconds. In the dim half-light of the cellar, I make out a familiar shape. The furnace. It's an old fashioned coal furnace. Slowly I stagger across the floor, open the furnace door, drag myself inside, and slam the door behind me. Not even caring, I lie in

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the darkness, breathing in great gasps of cool air and age-old soot. Then the dogs arrive, screaming with impotent rage, flinging themselves at the sides of the furnace, rasping the metal sides of the furnace with helpless teeth and claws. Let'um rave. They can't get in.

And, I suddenly realize, I can't get out either.

Somehow, my head just doesn't seem to be working right today.

You'd think furnace manufacturers would have sense enough to put an inside handle on their doors. I think of donuts and my mouth begins to water.

After a while, because I am dead tired . . . but mainly because there isn't very much to keep one busy inside a furnace, I fall asleep. How long I sleep I don't know, but I am awakened by the sudden barking of the dogs.

"What now?" I wonder.

Then, above the howls and yapping of the pack, I hear the unmistakable sound of horse's hoofs, clip-clopping in the distance. The sound grows slowly closer and closer. There's only one horse from the sound of it, and he is walking very slowly. The dogs are growling and snarling now, shuffling back and forth restlessly, barking now and then. The horse stops in the alley, just outside.

The dogs seem frightened now. I can hear their fearful whines all around me. What's that I hear? Footsteps! Human footsteps!

"Help!" I cry. *"Save me! I'm in the furnace!"*

No answer.

There is a whir, a sharp whipsnap, and a startled yelp. Again the whip crack, and a chorus of yipes and howls. I can hardly believe my ears as I hear the dog pack scrambling away, retreating in panic and confusion out the front cellar windows.

"Help!" I cry again. "Save me! Get me out of here!"

Silence.

Why doesn't he say something? Slowly the footsteps approach the furnace and stop just outside the door. He's fumbling with the latch. The door opens with a rusty creak. I stare out into darkness only a little less dim than the inside of the furnace.

"Come on out," says a deep, cold voice from the gloom. "They're gone now. It's perfectly safe."

I struggle through the narrow doorway and stand coughing in the clouds of soot that billow off of me at every movement.

"You all right?" asks the voice.

"I . . . I guess so."

"Then follow me."

A hand grasps my elbow and drags me up some stone steps. I raise my eyes and see . . . the stars, the beautiful stars. Nearby stands the horse, big and grey, snorting and swishing his tail. There's no saddle on him, just a home-made rope halter. I turn to speak to the man who saved me,

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but his strange appearance stops the words in my throat. He is tall and thin, wearing a tattered overcoat and a crumpled rainhat and carrying a long blacksnake whip. The most striking thing about him, though, is not his tangled beard or his horn-rimmed mirror glasses, but his nose . . . huge and hooked . . . the biggest and most evil-looking nose I have ever seen.

"Who are you?" he asks me.

"My name is Mohammed Smith, Mo for short, and I'm a composer."

"And what are you doing here?"

"I was just strolling through on my way downtown when . . ."

"Nobody 'just strolls' through this part of town. What are you escaping from? The Law?"

"The Law? Me? Why, don't be absurd!"

"Don't tell me then, Mr. Smith. If that really is your name. I know there are some things too shameful to be shared even with others like yourself."

"Now see here, I don't have to stand for that kind of talk, Mister . . ."

"They call me The Beak. Now get on the horse." He cups his hands for my foot to help me on. I get on and he straddles the horse behind me. We set off at a slow clip-clop down the empty star-lit alley. As we enter the street, a horse and buggy, running without lights, crosses the intersection a few blocks away.

"Are there people living here?" I ask in surprise.

"Yes."

"But why don't they use any lights?"

"It is better if we don't remind the outside world of our existance."

I half-turn, trying to face him, and my shoulder bumps his nose. It almost falls off, but he catches it and puts it carefully back in place.

"My God!" I gasp. "It's not real!"

"No, it's not."

"But why do you wear it? For a mask?"

"No. It is the face beneath it that is the mask."

"But that Beak isn't you! That's just a dime store novelty! Why don't you . . ."

"Why don't I just 'be myself'? I tried that. You don't know how hard I tried. It would have been easy enough, I suppose, if I'd known just what my 'self' was, like everybody else seems to, but I didn't. I tried Psychoanalysis, Scientology, Astrology . . . I tried sitting in an orgone box. I tried even religion . . . everything. For fifteen long years I searched for myself without success, then one day I was walking past a practical joke store and saw in the window . . . a nose, a remarkably life-like big plastic nose, with a pair of horn-rim mirror-glass fake eyeglasses to hold it on.

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Suddenly I had an idea! Why go on with this futile search for my so-called 'self', when I could so easily just give it up and be somebody else? I rushed inside and bought up all the plastic noses they had in stock, and since that time, seven years ago, I have never been without one. You can't imagine the feeling of relief I felt the first time I put one on and looked at myself in the mirror! It gave my face a real, a definite character . . . a slightly ridiculous character perhaps . . . a rather malicious, even criminal character . . . but a definite one!"

"I see," I say, though I don't really see at all. "But I still don't understand why you chose to come *here*, of all places, to live."

"I did not *choose* to live here, Mr. Smith. I had no choice in the matter. One simply does not go around with a fake nose on in the modern world. My wife and my business associates were planning to have me put away, but I was one jump ahead of them. One night after work, instead of going home, I came here, and I've been here ever since."

My new life with The Beak is routine but somehow restful. We do nothing except hunt wild dog and cat, squirrel and bird at night and sleep and eat during the day, but as days turn into weeks and weeks into months, the thought of what Harley Quinn might be doing with my wife becomes more and more intolerable instead of fading away, as The Beak keeps assuring me it will.

Finally, one day after a good meal of cat soup, I break the news to him.

"I'm going back to civilization," I say.

"Don't talk like a fool," says The Beak.

"I've got to go back. I've got a score to settle with that man I told you about, Harley Quinn."

He puts down a cat leg bone and stares at me sadly from behind his huge false nose.

"If you must, you must," he sighs wearily. "I'll go into the scrap bin and see if I can't dig out some suitable weapon for you."

He rummages around a bit and soon returns with an old revolver and a box of shells.

"Here," he says quietly. "Take this, and good luck."

"Mohammed Smith!" gasps the elder of the two Johnson wives as she opens her front door. "Come in, come in! Where on earth have you been all this time? Debbie has been frantic!"

"She has? Where is she now?" I ask, stepping inside.

"She'll be back any minute now. Would you care to wait?"

"Thank you, I will." I sit down facing the front door.

"Darlings!" she calls to the others. "Look who's here. Mr. Smith

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is back!" The other Johnsons come trooping in and stare at me as if I were an animal in a zoo. I keep my eye on the door and my hand on the gun in my pocket. When Harley opens that door . . . blooey! Right between the eyes!

"You know," says one of the male Johnsons. "Harley really made a mint of money recently."

"Really? How?"

"By selling some tapes of Charlie Parker music. We asked him where he got them and he said he just found them in his briefcase. That Harley is a great kidder, isn't he?"

There is a pause, then . . . "He's a million laughs," I mutter.

One of the Johnsons is standing by the window. Suddenly he turns to me and says, "Why, here comes Debbie and Harley now."

In the distance I hear their voices growing steadily louder. It sounds like they are having quite an argument.

"Oh shut up!" cries Debbie, and their footsteps sound on the path, then on the front steps. One of the Johnsons presses the opener button and the door slides open. Debbie enters, followed by Harley. She has changed her hair color to blonde. Harley sees me first, and an oily smile of greeting is starting to distort his con-man lips when I take out my gun.

"Wait!" shouts Harley, as I pull the trigger.

Blooey!

I blast a hole right between the eyes of the picture of Julius Caesar on the wall.

"Don't!" shouts Harley.

I take more careful aim, pull the trigger again.

Blooey!

I shoot a hole in the door. I never knew these darn things were so hard to aim.

I pull the trigger again.

Blooey!

I smash the earthenware pot next to the door into a thousand flying psudo-Greek pieces.

"Here," says Harley. "Give me that."

He reaches out and snatches the gun out of my hand.

"Ow!" he squeals. "It's hot!"

The air is full of gunsmoke and all eyes are on me, round with fascinated horror. Harley Quinn hands the gun to Debbie and says, "You keep him covered. I'll find something to tie him up with."

Debbie stands with the gun in her hand looking first at him, then at me, then at him again. Finally she points the gun at him and snaps, "Stick'um up, pardner! Mo, get some sheets out of the linen closet and tie these varmints up, then you and I are gonna hit the trail."

Fifteen minutes later the Johnsons and Harley Quinn are all trussed up like a row of mummies on the floor, and Debbie and I depart for Old Chicago, locking the door behind us.

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"Attempted murder!" she gasps, gazing at me with admiration as she trots along at my side. "How wonderfully depraved!"

"I wanna donut," I whimper.

The only answer to my heartfelt plea is the mocking silence of the ruins. With a sigh of sad resignation I pillow my head in Debbie's lap and watch the progress of an approaching skycar. Suddenly the skycar swerves and from its jets pours a stream of blazing blue-white flame.

"Look!" shouts Debbie. "It's skywriting!"

Sure enough, as the little skycar dips and loops the blue-white glistening vapor trail forms letters, one after another.

"Mohammed! It's spelling out your name!"

"So it is. Now it seems to be starting a message."

Word by word the message comes.

"Mohammed Smith, I challenge you to a duel to the death at high noon tomorrow in Bughouse Square in front of Newberry Library. You may choose the weapons.

Your friend,
Harley Quinn."

Its message complete, the little aircar zooms away to the north and is soon lost in the darkness. I laugh.

"How brave you are," says Debbie, impressed. "In the face of danger, you merely laugh contemptuously."

"Ha ha ha!" I laugh contemptuously.

"But tomorrow, at high noon, will you still laugh so boldly?"

"Ha ha ha!" I laugh boldly. "You bet I will, because tomorrow I'm going to stay in bed."

"Clod!" she snorts, delivering a well-aimed kick at my innocent behind. "If you aren't man enough to fight for me, I'm going back to Harley!"

She leaps to her feet and stomps away.

"Wait!" I shout after her. "Come back! I'll fight all right, if you put it that way."

I arrive with Debbie and the Beak at Bughouse Square at about 11 o'clock the next day, carrying two bows and a bundle of arrows and feeling pretty worried.

"Here comes Harley," says Debbie, pointing into the northern sky. I hardly have time to turn around before Harley Quinn's skycar comes sweeping in, circles once overhead, and settles into the weed-infested street nearby. The door swings open and Harley steps out, looking a little pale. One of the Johnson men is with him, nervously touching the electrode on his head with his battery pencil.

"Hullo, Mohammed," says Harley, licking his lips.

"I've chosen my weapon," I

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say. "Bow and arrow. I've brought one for you."

"You didn't have to do that, Mo. I thought you'd pick something like that, so I brought a bow of my own. It's a real beauty. The body is magnesium alloy and the string is fiberglass. The arrows are magnesium too, except for the tips, and machined to tolerances of only a few thousandths of an inch."

"You don't say," I mumble, trying to hide my sad little homemade bow behind my back.

"Well," says Harley with a sigh, "we might as well get on with it. In a way I'm sorry this had to happen. I always kind of liked you, Mohammed."

"I always kind of liked you too, Harley," I murmur as we shake hands.

"You walk to opposite ends of the block," interrupts the Beak, eager to get it over with, "then turn and start shooting."

Harley and I turn our backs on each other and set off for the opposite ends of the street. When I reach the end of the block, I do an "about face." Harley is already standing at the other end of the block, bow and arrow at the ready. With shaking fingers I try to fit my arrow to the string, but somehow it just doesn't seem to stay put.

"Come on, Mo," shouts the Johnson. "Stop stalling around."

Finally I get it set.

"Ready?" shouts the Beak.

"Ready!" shouts Harley.

"Ready!" I shout.

The Beak signals for us to begin.

Slowly we start advancing toward each other, step by step. A robin lands on the pavement between us, then takes off again.

Harley stops, raises his bow and draws back the string.

I stop too, and draw back my string.

For a long silent moment we stand aiming at each other like two bookends, then suddenly . . .

"Squeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!!!!!!!!!!!!" screams the Globbly, scuttling out of a side street and running wildly toward us, whirling his arms like propellors.

With all his tiny might the Globbly hurls himself on me, knocking the bow and arrow from my hands, then, as Harley stares stupidly at him, the Gobbly bounds up to him in three long leaps and knocks the bow and arrow from his hands too. Then the Globbly picks up one of Harley's precision-ground arrows and touches it to his heart.

"It's going to kill itself!" cries the Johnson. "Won't anyone stop him? That creature cost me a fortune!"

But the Globbly does not plunge the arrow home. He just stands holding it there, glaring at first Harley and then me.

"No, he won't kill himself if we give up the duel," I say, suddenly grasping the meaning of the creature's actions.

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Harley stands dumbfounded for a moment, then slowly a smile begins to play about the corners of his mouth. He kneels down and pats the little animal gently on the head.

"Don't worry, you little devil," he chuckles. "We won't hurt each other."

The Globbly grasps Harley Quinn's little finger and leads him over to me, then takes my little finger in his other hand and looks up at us expectantly.

"He wants us to shake hands," says Harley.

The Globbly nods assent, and we shake hands. The Globbly jumps up and down with joy a few times, then leads us over to where Debbie stands watching us and fighting back a giggle.

"The poor thing only wants us all to be friends and to be happy so it can be happy, too," she says. "But how can we be? It seems that if one of us is happy, it is only at the expense of the others."

I glance over and meet Johnson's eyes. I know what he's going to suggest, and I suppose it is really the only way out. Impulsively I kneel down before Harley, take his hand in mine and say, "Harley dear, will you marry me?"

Harley stares at me open-mouthed while the Globbly turns sommersaults of glee.

"You know," I add. "Just you and Debbie and me. We'll be happy together, I know we will."

"Is that what you want, Debbie?" he asks her.

"Of course, Harley! How delightfully decadent it will be!" she cries ecstatically.

"Do it now, before you chicken out," urges Johnson. "I've got a copy of the ceremonial pledge right here in my pocket!" He whips it out and hands it to us.

After studying the pledge a moment, Debbie, Harley and I form a ring holding hands and repeat in solemn monotones these words, *"I pledge to you my life and all I own. I will not knowingly act against you and if you call on me for help, I will not refuse you. I will not rest content until you have food, clothing and shelter, and I will care for your children as my own. If you are sick, I will nurse you. If you are hunted, I will hide you. If you are lonely, I will talk to you. Let us now stand together so that mankind will not die by its own hand."*

"I now pronounce you," says Johnson proudly, "*men* and wife."

When we adjourn to the Beak's place he excuses himself for a few minutes and sets about rummaging around in the junk bin for some wedding presents for us. Finally he finds what he wants . . . a beautiful ring for Debbie, a sword for Harley, and for me . . . a fantastic old saxophone with a plastic reed, just like Charlie Parker once played.

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"I can show you how to play the chromatic scale on it," says the Beak. "Then you can at last realize your dream of making music just like Charlie Parker."

I take the old horn gently in my hands, raise the mouthpiece to my lips and blow.

Honk!

A cloud of dust billows out of the horn and sets everybody coughing and sneezing.

"See," says the Beak. "You know one note already!"

In the months that follow, we three become inseparable companions. We hunt together, fish together, and work together all the time at first. Later on, though, Harley and I start taking turns spending the day with our mutual beloved. I get the feeling that Harley is getting more turns than I am, but when Harley explains it to me, it all seems perfectly fair. Anyway, on those days when it is Harley's turn, I sit outside in the back yard amidst the rusty tin cans and broken bottles and serenade them on my saxophone. Debbie says it is very romantic, particularly from a distance, and all those years of studying Charlie Parker's style are really paying off. Sometimes, when I play "Ool-Ya-Coo" or "Oo-Bop-She-Bam" it sounds more like real Parker than anything I was ever able to produce on the music computer. Now that everything has turned out for the best, you might think I'd be blissfully happy and contented, but the sad truth is I'm not. I guess there really must be something or other wrong with my head.

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LUNAR LANDING

by Theodore L. Thomas

THERE HAS BEEN SURPRISINGLY little discussion in print on the problem of landing a rocket. People seem to assume that a landing is nothing more than a take-off in reverse. Nothing could be further from the truth.

A landing has one particular feature about it that a take-off does not have. To make a landing, it is essential that a precise velocity—substantially zero, be achieved at a precise point—the landing surface. The zero velocity may not be achieved 50 below or 50 feet above the landing surface. The two factors must substantially coincide.

During a take-off, if the rocket is traveling too fast or too slow when it arrives at a predetermined point, it can easily be speeded or slowed to compensate, and plenty of time is available. In a landing, there is less time for such compensation, and each error leaves even less time. Another point. In a landing, the retrorockets are fired when the rocket has high velocity and momentum; errors are magnified; the rocket covers greater distances before corrections can be effected.

The United States has scheduled 17 Surveyor vehicles for exploration of the Moon, most of them for soft landings. The early ones will be lifted by one-shot Centaur rockets. The Surveyors are allotted 5 minutes to land once the retrorockets are ignited. When the rocket has slowed to 630 miles per hour, the retrorocket is jettisoned, and the vernier or guidance rockets do the rest. The vernier rockets reduce the velocity to less than 10 m.p.h. about 13 feet above the landing surface, and the Surveyor falls the rest of the way. At the Moon's lower gravity, the rocket won't hit as hard as it would on Earth. But all the problems of accomplishing zero velocity at the surface are there, compounded by the fact that the nearest men are almost a quarter of a million miles away. There is no one there to report the results and the mistakes.

Perhaps the enormous lunar landing problem would be eased if we went back to a human institution that seems to have disappeared

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these days—the volunteer. There are good men around who for one reason or another don't give a damn. One of them could make the one-way trip to the Moon, and the information he sent back would be invaluable; it would probably save lives before lunar exploration is all over. Maybe it would not be a bad thing to be the first, or second, or third man to live and die on the Moon.

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"If I had an interesting biography I wouldn't be writing SF and Fantasy," writes R. A. Lafferty. "I am, not necessarily in that order, fifty years old, a bachelor, an electrical engineer, a fat man." Although we've never met Mr. Lafferty, we think we can safely add to that: A Funny Man. Witness this wonderful piece of clowning about one bushy-tailed machine—a nullifier which can posit moral and ethical judgements, set up and enforce categories, which knows junk when it sees it and sends the no-good stuff clear over the edge.

HOG-BELLY HONEY

by R. A. Lafferty

I'M JOE SPADE—ABOUT AS INTELlectual a guy as you'll find all day. I invented Wotto and Voxo and a bunch of other stuff that nobody can get along without anymore. It's on account of I have so much stuff in my head that I sometimes go to a head-grifter. This day all of them I know is out of town when I call. Lot's of times everybody I know is out of town when I call. I go to a new one. The glass in his door says he is a anapsychologist, which is a head-grifter in the popular speech.

"I'm Joe Spade the man that got everything," I tell him and slap him on the back in that hearty way of mine. There is a crunch sound and at first I think I have crack his rib. Then I see I have only broke his glasses so no harm done. "I am what you call a flat-footed genius, doc," I tell him, "with plenty of the crimp-cut green-leaf."

I take the check card away from him and mark it up myself to save time. I figure I know more about me than he does.

"Remember, I can get them nine dollar words for four-eighty-five wholesale, doc," I josh him and he looks at me painful.

"Modesty isn't one of your failings," this head-grifter tell me as he scun my card. "Hum! Single—significant."

I had written down the 'Single'

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in the blank for it, but he had see for himself that I am a significant man.

"Solvent," he read for the blank about the pecuniary stuff, "I like that in a man. We will arrange for a few sessions."

"One will do it," I tell him. "Time is running and I am paying. Give me a quick read, doc."

"Yes, I can give you a very rapid reading," he says. "I want you to ponder the ancient adage: It is not good for Man to be Alone. Think about it a while, and perhaps you will be able to put one and one together."

Then he add kind of sad, "Poor woman!" which is either the nonsecular of the year or else he is thinking of some other patient. Then he add again, "That will be three yards, in the lingo."

"Thanks, doc," I say. I pay the head-grifter his three hundred dollars and leave. He has hit the nail on the noggin and put his toe on the root of my trouble.

I will take me a partner in my business.

I spot him in Grogley's and I know right away he's the one. He's about half my size but otherwise he's as much like me as two feet in one shoe. He's real good looking—just like me. He's dressed sweet, but has a little blood on his face like can happen to anyone in Grogley's for five minutes. Man we're twins! I know we will talk alike and think alike just like we look alike.

"Eheu! Fugaces!" my new partner says real sad. That means 'Brother this has been one day with all the bark on it!' He is drinking the Fancy and his eyes look like cracked glass.

"He's been having quite a few little fist fights," Grogley whispers to me, "but he don't win none. He isn't very fast with his hands. I think he's got troubles."

"Not no more he don't," I tell Grogley, "he's my new partner."

I slap my new partner on the back in that hearty way I have, and the tooth that flew out must have been a loose one.

"You don't have no more troubles, Roscoe," I tell him, "you and me is just become partners." He looks kind of sick at me.

"Maurice is the name," he says, "Maurice Maltravers. How are things back in the rocks? You, sir, are a troglodyte. They always come right after the snakes. That's the only time I wish the snakes would come back."

Lots of people call me a troglodyte.

"Denied the sympathy of humankind," Maurice carries on, "perhaps I may find it in an inferior species. I wonder if I could impose on your ears—gahhhh!—" (He made a humorous sound there)—"are those things ears? What a fearsome otological apparatus you do have!—the burden of my troubles."

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"I just told you you don't have none, Maurice," I say. "Come along with me and we'll get into the partner business."

I pick him up by the scruff and haul him out of Grogley's.

"I see right away you are my kind of man," I say.

"My kind of man—*putridus ad volva,*" Maurice gives me the echo. Hey, this guy is a gale! Just like me.

"My cogitational patterns are so intricate and identatic oriented," says Maurice when I set him down and let him walk a little, "that I become a closed system—unintelligible to the exocosmos and particularly to a chthonian like yourself."

"I'm mental as hell myself, Maurice," I tell him, "there ain't nothing the two of us can't do together."

"My immediate difficulty is that the University has denied me further use of the Computer," Maurice tells me. "Without it, I cannot complete the Ultimate Machine."

"I got a computer'll make that little red schoolhouse turn green," I tell him.

We come to my place which a man have call in print 'a converted horse barn, probably the most unorthodox and badly appointed scientific laboratory in the world.' I take Maurice in with me, but he carries on like a chicken with its hat off when he finds out the only calculator I got is the one in my head.

"You livid monster, I can't work in this mares'-nest," he screeches at me. "I've got to have a calculator, a computer."

I tap my head with a six pound pien hammer and grin my famous grin. "It's all inside here, Maurice boy," I tell him, "the finest calculator in the world. When I was with the Carnivals they billed me as the Idiot Genius. I'd run races with the best computers they had in a town, multiplying twenty-place numbers and all the little tricks like that. I cheated though. I invented a gadget and carried it in my pocket. It's jam the relays of the best computers and slow them down for a full second. Give me a one second hop and I can beat anything in the world at anything. The only thing wrong with those jobs is that I had to talk and act kind of dumb to live up to my billing The Idiot Genius, and that dumb stuff was hard on an intellectual like I."

"I can see that it would be," Maurice said. "Can you handle involuted matrix Maimonides-conditioned third-aspect numbers in the Cauchy sequence wih simultaneous non-temporal involvement of the Fieschi manifold?"

"Maurice, I can do it and fry up a bunch of eggs to go with it at the same time," I tell him. Then I look him right in the middle of the eye. "Maurice," I say, "You're working on a nullifier."

He look at me like he take me serious for the first time. He pull a sheaf of papers out of his shirt, and

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sure enough he is working on a nullifier—a sweet one.

"This isn't an ordinary nullifier," Maurice points out, and I see that it ain't. "What other nullifier can posit moral and ethical judgements? What other can set up and enforce categories? What other can really discern? This will be the only nullifier able to make full philosophical pronouncements. Can you help me finish it, Proconsul?"

A Proconsul is about the same as an alderman, so I know Maurice think high of me. We throw away the clock and get with it. We work about twenty hours a day. I compute it and build it at the same time—out of Wotto-metal naturally. At the end we use feed-back a lot. We let the machine decide what we will put in it and what leave out. The main difference between our nullifier and all others is that ours will be able to make decisions. So, let it make them!

We finish it in about a week. Man it is a sweet thing! We play with it a while to see what it can do. It can do everything.

I point it at a half-bushel of bolts and nuts I got there. "Get rid of everything that ain't standard thread," I program it, "half that stuff is junk."

And half that stuff is gone right now! This thing works! Just set in what you want it to get rid of, and it's gone without a trace.

"Get rid of *everything* here that's no good for nothing," I program it. I had me a place there that has been described as cluttered. That machine blinked once, and then I had a place you could get around in. That thing knew junk when it saw it, and it sure sent that no-good stuff clear over the edge. Of course anybody can make a nullifier that won't leave no remains of whatever it latches on to, but this is the only one that knows what not to leave no remains of by itself. Maurice and me is tickled as pink rabbits over the thing.

"Maurice," I say, and I slap him on the back so his nose bleeds a little, "this is one bushy-tailed gadget. There ain't nothing we can't do with it."

But Maurice looks kind of sad for a moment.

"A quo bono?" he ask, which I think is the name of a mineral water, so I slosh him out some brandy which is better. He drink the brandy but he's still thoughtful.

"But what good is it?" he ask. "It is a triumph, of course, but in what category could we market it? It seems that I've been here a dozen times with the perfect apparatus that nobody wants. Is there really a mass market for a machine that can posit moral and ethical judgements, that can set up and enforce categories, that is able to discern, and to make philosophical pronouncements? Have I not racked up one more triumphant folly?"

"Maurice, this thing is a natural-born garbage disposal," I tell

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him. He turn that green color lots of people do when I shed a big light on them. . .

"A garbage disposal!" he sings out. "The aeons labored to give birth to it through the finest mind —mine—of the millennium, and this brother of a giant ape says it is a garbage disposal! It is a new aspect of thought, the *nova instauratio*, the mind of tomorrow fruited today, and this obscene ogre says it is a Garbage Disposal!! The Constellations do homage to it, and Time has not waited in vain—and you, you splay-footed horse-herder, you call it a GARBAGE DISPOSAL!!!"

Maurice was so carried away with the thought that he cried a little. It sure is nice when someone agrees with you as long and loud as Maurice did. When he was run out of words he got aholt of the brandy bottle with both hands and drunk it all off. Then he slept the clock around. He was real tired.

He looked kind of sheepful when he finally woke up.

"I feel better now, outside of feeling worse," he says. "You are right, it's a garbage disposal."

He programmed it to get all the slush out of his blood and liver and kidneys and head. It did it. It cured his hangover in straight-up no time at all. It also shaved him and removed his appendix. Just give it the nod and it would nullify anything.

"We will call it the Hog-Belly Honey," I say, "on account of it will eat anything, and it work so sweet."

"That is what we will call it privately," Maurice nodded, "but in company it will be known as the Pantophag." That is the same thing in Greek.

It was at the time of this area of good feeling that I split a Voxo with Maurice. Each of you have one half of a tuned Voxo and you can talk to each other anywhere in the world, and the thing is so nonconspicuous that nobody can see it on you.

We got a big booth and showed the Hog-Belly Honey, the Pantophag, at the Trade Fair.

Say, we did put on a good show! The people came in and looked and listened till they were wall-eyed. That Maurice could give a good spiel, and I'm about the best there is myself. We sure were two fine-looking men, after Maurice told me that maybe I detracted a little bit by being in my undershirt, and I went and put a shirt on. And that bushy-tailed machine just sparkled—like everything does that is made out of wotto-metal.

Kids threw candy-bar wrappers at it, and they disappeared in the middle of the air. "Frisk me," they said, and everything in their pockets that was no good for nothing was gone. A man held up a stuffed brief case, and it was almost empty in a minute. A few people got

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mad when they lost beards and moustaches, but we explained to them that their boscage hadn't done a thing for them; if the ornaments had had even appearance value the machine would have left them be. We pointed out other people who kept their brush; whatever they had behind it, they must have needed the cover.

"Could I have one in my house, and when?" a lady asks.

"Tomorrow, for forty-nine ninety-five installed," I tell her. "It will get rid of anything no good. It'll pluck chickens, or bone roasts for you. It will clear out all those old love letters from that desk and leave just the ones from the guy that meant it. It will relieve you of thirty pounds in the strategic places, and frankly lady this alone will make it worth your while. It will get rid of old buttons that don't match, and seeds that won't sprout. It will destroy everything that is not no good for nothing."

"It can posit moral and ethical judgements," Maurice tells the people. "It can set up and enforce categories."

"Maurice and me is partners," I tell them all. "We look alike and think alike. We even talk alike."

"Save I in the hieratic and he in the demotic," Maurice say. "This is the only nullifier in the world able to make full philosophical pronouncements. It is the unfailing judge of what is of some use and what is not. And it disposes neatly."

Man, the people did pour in to see it all that morning! They slacked off a little bit just about noon.

"I wonder how many people have come into our booth this morning?" Maurice wondered to me. "I would guess near ten thousand."

"I don't have to guess," I say. "There is nine thousand three hundred and fifty-eight who have come in, Maurice," I tell him, for I am always the automatic calculator. "There is nine thousand two hundred and ninety-seven who have left, I go on, "and there are forty-four here now."

Maurice smiled. "You have made a mistake," he says. "It doesn't add up."

And that is when the hair riz up on the back of my neck.

I don't make mistakes when I calculate, and I see now that the Hog-Belly Honey don't make none either. Well, it's too late to make one now if you're not trained for it, but it might not be too late to get out the way of the storm before it hits.

"Crank the cuckoo," I whisper to Maurice, "make the bindlestiff, hit the macadam!"

"*Je ne comprends pas,*" says Maurice, which means 'Let's hit the road, boys,' in French, so I know my partner understands me.

I am out of the display hall at

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a high run, and Maurice racing along beside me so lightfoot that he don't make no noise. There is a sky-taxi just taking off.

"Jump for it, Maurice!" I sing out. I jump for it myself, and hook my fingers over the rear rail and am dangling in the air. I look to see if Maurice make it. Make it! He isn't even there! He didn't come out with me. I look back, and I see him through a window going into his spiel again.

Now that is a mule-headed development. My partner, who is as like me as two heads in one hat, had not understand me.

At the port I hook onto a sky-freight just going to Mexico.

I don't never have to pack no bag. I say that a man who don't always carry two years' living in that crimp green stuff in his back pocket ain't in no condition to meet Fate. In thirty minutes I am sit down in a hotel in Cueva Poquita and have all the pleasantries at hand. Then I snap on my Voxo to hear what Maurice is signaling about.

"Why didn't you tell me that the Pantophag was nullifying people?" he ask kind of shrill.

"I did tell you," I say. "Nine thousand two hundred and ninety-seven added to forty-four don't come to nine thousand three hundred and fifty-eight. You said so yourself. How are things on the home front, Maurice? That's a joke."

"It's no joke," he say kind of fanatic like. "I have locked myself in a little broom closet, but they're going to break down the door. What can I do?"

"Why, Maurice, just explain to those people that the folks nullified by the machine were no good for nothing, because the machine don't make mistakes."

"I doubt that I can convince the parents and spouses and children of the nullified people of this. They're after blood. They're breaking down the door now, Spade. I hear them say they are going to hang me."

"Tell them you won't settle for anything less than a new rope, Maurice," I tell him. That's an old joke. I switch off the Voxo because Maurice is not making anything except gurgling noises which I cannot interpret.

A thing like that blow over real fast after they have already hang one guy for it and are satisfied. I am back in town and am rolling all those new ideas around in my head like a bunch of rocks. But I'm not going to build the Hog-Belly Honey again. It is too logical for safety, and is a little before its time.

I am looking to get me another partner. Come into Grogley's if you are interested. I show up there every hour or so. I want a guy as like me as two necks in one noose —what make me think of a thing

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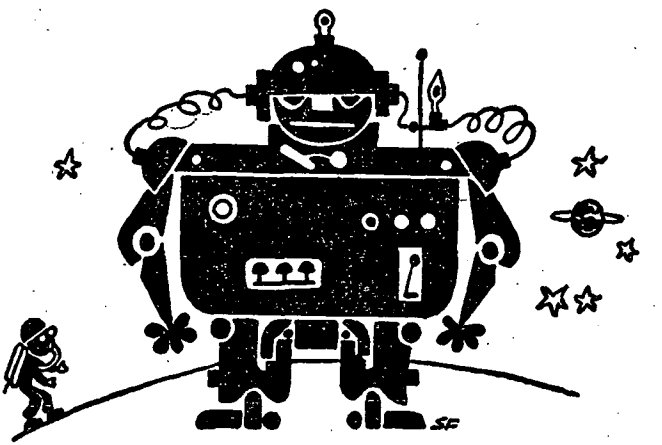
like that?—a guy who look like me and think like me and talk like me.

Just ask for Joe Spade.

But the one I hook onto for a new partner will have to be a fellow who understands me when the scuppers are down.



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"Rats! They fought the dogs and killed the cats, / And bit the babies in the cradles,"—that from Browning's version of the Pied Piper. We understand that Hamelin still has a rat problem, but now uses professional exterminators ("If you like rats, that's your business, if you don't like 'em, it's ours.") rather than flutists. So, man's war against the hated rodent goes on and on. But supposing, just for a moment, that the roles were reversed . . .

TURNING POINT

by Arthur Porges

IT WAS THAT UNHAPPY TIME when Earth was ruled by the Empire of the Rats. From pole to pole, the word of the Rat Emperor was law, neither to be questioned nor evaded by any rodent nor by any man.

Throughout man's early history, the rat had been one of his chief rivals for dominance, along with the insects. Lacking both the intelligence of such near-men as the higher apes, and the blind, irresistible fertility of the insects, the rats began with a fair share of the two advantages. Their forepaws were not as dexterous as a monkey's fingers, but distinctly better than hoofs or talons; and their litters, while no match for aphid eggs, were large and viable all over the globe.

Originally small in size—from an inch or two in the case of mice, to a foot or more in some tropical species of cane-rats, and even larger in related species, like the capybara—the rats had profited from man's own belligerence and ruthlessness. And his perverted science. The Atomic War that began in 1992 exterminated roughly ninety per cent of all life on earth. Humanity was back to its primitive beginnings, with small, scattered, barbaric tribes surviving in odd corners of the globe. The insects came out best, numerically, but hadn't

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the genetic stuff to take full advantage of their temporary dominance. The rats, decimated, but much more resistant to hard radiation than man, were favored by nature, inscrutable and capricious as ever in her workings.

The rodents mutated to an unusual degree, becoming not only much bigger, but greatly improved mentally, with a new power of abstraction. When some rat-genius was able to note and understand the connection between two burrows and the idea of a pair, the handwriting was on the wall for anybody to read; but there were few prophets among the remnants of human civilization to interpret the omens.

With their frequent litters, and generations that came and went in hundreds before a man grew old, the rats maintained their vital lead. Before long they were reading, and using, man's own written records, a fair proportion of which had survived the war. Those few communities that still had retained technical competence, fought hard, using rifles, poison, flame, and gas; but were overwhelmed by the enemy, which was willing to die in his thousands to kill or capture a single human.

There was a great deal of irony in the resulting situation. The rats, because of their racial memories of man, were oddly ambivalent towards the species. On the other hand, they remembered, with fury, the traps, ferrets, and agonizing chemicals of the past. But they also recalled, in some queer emotional way, that no brown rat was ever happy living in the wilds away from man—and it was not merely a matter of food and shelter. The rats actually liked to have people around; and even now, when man was subordinate—a conquered race—the rats felt the same way.

Naturally, the humans had no such tolerance; they had always hated and feared rats; and that hadn't changed. An added irony could be found in the relatively merciful treatment afforded man by the Empire of the Rats. People were allowed to live in their own communities, provided the rats had full access to them at all times. A close watch was kept to see that no dangerous weapons were invented or re-built; and above all, reproduction was sternly controlled—the human population was kept absolutely and irrevocably fixed at ten thousand. The rats knew very well that if man was ever allowed unchecked breeding, he would, in his fierceness and intelligence, regain the ascendancy just lost by the Atomic War.

Wise in their reading of history, the rats even had a safety valve for the release of social pressure—the sort built up by fanatical and ingenious malcontents: the Garrisons, Hitlers, Toussaints, and Ghandis of the time. Anybody who so desired, was permitted to emi-

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grate beyond the control of the Emperor. There was one place on earth—a region of South America—where no rat could survive. In those thousands of square miles of steaming jungle, a virus disease had developed that was quickly fatal to rats, but had no effect on man. It is possible that with enough time and trouble—and the doubtful help of human scientists, who were often necessary to rat-technology, and so coddled at need—the rats could have solved the problem, and made the region habitable. But it wasn't worth the effort; there was still plenty of space, since the earth was starting again from scratch, so to speak.

Their tolerance was remarkable. Instead of killing such malcontents, as many human tyrants have done, and unwisely, as it turned out, the rats allowed them to emigrate to the Amazon. But the rodents were not stupid. Anybody who wished to leave had to submit to sterilization; there would be no hidden population explosion in the jungle. Unable to breed, the colony of humans was not a danger to the Empire. Sterilization was accomplished by x-rays and drugs, and great care was taken to make sure it was irreversible by surgery; it was not just a matter of cutting cords in the male, but a thorough operation just short of emasculation, done, of course, in a hospital under the best, most painless, and aseptic conditions. With a woman, the ovaries were removed. A human surgeon could be used, under the supervision of a rat, equally well qualified, but slightly less dextrous, as both species knew.

The mutated rats, it should be pointed out, were still not as big as men, but stood about four feet tall on their hindpaws, the front ones having become very much like hands, but not quite as flexible, lacking a completely opposable thumb. Communication between the two species, strangely, was in English plus an admixture of other human languages. The rats, after all, had learned reading and writing from documents, books, records, and films of their ancient enemy. A rat's voice was still squeaky, but no less lucid than that of a hoarse and excited girl soprano, for example; and people soon learned to catch every nuance of the conversation—or orders.

The rat species had always been community-centered; the rodents liked to live together, and were quick to respond to the calls of any member of the group that was in trouble. So it was natural for the mutants to live in huge rat-cities, built to their own specifications, and above ground, but more than faintly mirroring human areas long since destroyed by nuclear fire.

Unknown to the rats—otherwise it could not have happened—the turning point came on August 20, 2067. A young scientist and his wife had applied for an emigration

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permit. The rats did not like to see trained humans leave their control, but the Emperor's policy was fixed; he and his council believed, as students of history, that it was best to allow malcontents to go away from the community—the farther the better—as long as they were made harmless first.

The Rat-Commissioner of Emigration, who issued the final papers, was a grey-brown rodent slightly smaller than the average, but with very keen, beady eyes, too undersized for his great forehead. His stiff, white whiskers were neatly trimmed. He wore no clothes, not belonging to that tiny, anti-social group of his kind that affected human garb, and spoke of the barbarity of nakedness. There were armed guards, but more as matter of honor and prestige than need. Mankind had no power-weapons, and none could be smuggled into the South American colony: there were too many rats on guard, and they were equipped with keener senses than man, able to see, smell, and whisker-feel in the worst light. Besides, in their immense bureaucracy, patterned after man's own, there were records of everybody's movements, papers to be filled out, and serial numbers for every artifact that might be turned against the Empire. If so much as an ancient revolver was moved from one house to another, the fact was instantly known and evaluated by a computer. Tight control, the rats knew, was their only chance—short of exterminating man—to stay on top. It is to their credit that they never seriously considered genocide.

"Walter Nolan," the Commissioner squeaked. "And wife, Gloria, born Gloria Bandini. Why do you want to leave, Mr. Nolan?"

"It's all down there," was the cold reply. "Why make me repeat it?"

"It says you can't breathe," the rat said. "Have we been so hard on you? You went to a good university; became a fine engineer. We have given you many advantages in pay and privileges."

"I want to be free," Nolan said stubbornly. "You wouldn't understand that."

"I'm afraid not," the Commissioner said, with a note of genuine regret in his voice. His beady eyes twinkled. "You see, when my people were slaves—or at least, not free—we didn't have the intelligence, consciousness, or civilization to know it. We died from poison, terriers, gas, and such horrors as dumb animals, without comprehension."

"I make no excuses," the man said. "Rats—the primitive, early kind, if I have the facts straight—were a great menace to my species. They destroyed more food than they actually ate; they carried dangerous diseases; and even killed or injured children."

"As to that last," was the dry retort, "your slum landlords and

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thieving politicians were more to blame than my kind, who knew no better, being only insentient brutes at that stage of their evolution." He sighed. "However, I see your mind is made up. But let me point out that we know what many of you are hoping for. You think that once out of our control you can mount a successful revolt against the Empire. Now we understand that a group of intelligent and dedicated men—fanatics—can produce, in spite of our safeguards, a core army, with excellent weapons. But because you can't multiply, and emigration is to be kept at reasonable levels in addition, you can always be overwhelmed if you leave your own country—and it is your own; we never trespass."

"Because you can't, and live."

"That's true; but we could find a suicide squad or two to penetrate the jungle and report before dying of the virus. But our controls make such a sacrifice pointless. Even with a new and potent weapon for each of you, a million rats with automatic arms, artillery, and even tanks, would crush you easily; that's obvious."

"But no planes," Nolan said.

"I admit that we rats have a racial horror of flight, perhaps because of hawks and owls; but neither can you make planes in the jungle villages—not now. If and when you do, a few hundred men can't pilot enough of them to destroy thousands of our communities. And there would be ample warnings; your borders are always watched, as you will learn."

He picked up the dossier. "The papers are in order. Your wife has had an ovariotomy, and you are completely sterile—or so it says. But," he added, looking at them keenly, "we never accept mere papers. I'll call the hospital and check with the surgical chief."

He pressed a lever on his intercom, and was soon through to the hospital listed on the form. After requesting a check, he listened to the squeaky sounds for some moments.

"I see," he said. "She aborted some days earlier. Then you operated. Yes, I understand." He turned off the intercom, and again faced the couple. "The surgeon tells me your wife had a miscarriage a day or two before coming for the required operation."

"If you must know," Nolan said in a hard voice, "she lost our baby because she so resented having one brought up a slave to rats. It was my idea to have it, anyhow. Now we're going away where if there are no babies, there is freedom from rats."

"All right," the Commissioner said. "Believe me, I'm sorry—about the baby." He stamped the essential passport, handed it to Nolan, and said: "You know the routine. You and your wife will be escorted to the boundary of the colony, and turned over to a man of your own

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future community. Good luck, and if you ever want to come back—"

"If I do," Nolan said grimly, "it won't be as a pliant subject of the Emperor, I assure you, but as an armed invader. I give you fair warning. You can search my baggage, and make me sterile, but nobody can ransack or neutralize this." He tapped his head.

The Commissioner gave him a grave and steady scrutiny for some seconds, his whiskers bristling. But when he spoke, his voice was level. "Goodbye, both of you," he said. "Next case, please."

Once outside the office, Gloria looked anxiously at the guards accompanying them to the bus, but they were well beyond earshot.

"Why so belligerant, for Heaven's sake?" she asked her husband. "Were you deliberately trying to make him angry? Did you see his whiskers? He could have canceled us out, you know; then where would we be?"

"I was scared stiff—that call to the hospital. I know they check, but for a minute, I thought he was on to us. So I tried to play the bitter, but planless, malcontent—a guy burned up, but with only generalities to threaten. And it seemed to work—at least, he didn't go into the abortion."

"They don't care about that; I'm not carrying a baby; that's enough for them. And I can't have any more," she added, her voice quivering briefly. "And you—never to be a father."

Once past the borders of the free territory, and heading for the largest community, deep in the jungle, called *Voltaire,* Nolan was quick to reassure their guide.

"It worked," he said, exultation in his voice. "They were completely fooled. Gloria—poor kid—has no ovaries; and me, I'm as sterile as any old mule; but our son is alive, and safe. Not in a little jar—that didn't work out; and anyway, they go through the luggage too thoroughly; even x-rays, which would be fatal. No, Doctor Soburu just implanted the fertile egg in my own peritoneum, where it will be quite all right for several days, at least. As soon as we reach *Voltaire,* one of your surgeons can put it back on the wall of Gloria's womb."

"Right," the guide said. "It should work. And if it does, you two are only the first. Others are coming soon; and even if the rats cut off all emigration later, we need only a few children—they won't be sterile! It took only Adam and Eve to give us 2,000,000,000 people, remember! We're on the way back."

At the Royal Palace, the Emperor of the Rats stirred uneasily in his sleep.

As well he might. ◄

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SCIENCE

DEATH IN THE LABORATORY

by Isaac Asimov

I'M A GREAT ONE FOR ICONOCLASM. Given half a chance, I love to say something shattering about some revered institution, and wax sarcastically cynical about Mother's Day or apple pie or baseball. Naturally, though, I draw the line at having people say nasty things about institutions I personally revere.

Like Science and Scientists, for instance. (Capital S, you'll notice.)

Scientists have their faults, of course. They can be stodgy and authoritarian and theories can get fixed in place and resist dislodging. There is, for instance, the sad case of the French chemist, Auguste Laurent and the Swedish chemist, Jons Jakob Berzelius.

In 1836, Laurent advanced some theories of the structure of organic compounds that were on the right track, while Berzelius had long maintained views in this respect that had important elements of wrongness. Unfortunately, Laurent was young and little-known and Berzelius was the Great Man of chemistry in his time, so Laurent was hounded into obscurity. He was forced to work in third-class poorly-heated laboratories, since no important institution would hire him in the face of Berzelius' displeasure, and the poor working conditions aggravated his tubercular condition and brought him to a premature death. Berzelius, on the other hand, died at the peak of his fame and it was only after his death that Laurent's views began to win out.

These things happen, alas, but not as often in science (I like to think) as in any other form of human endeavor.

At any rate, if someone is going to berate Science as an organization in which Authority stifles Initiative, and in which Vain Old Men squash Eager Young Geniuses, and where the lack of the union card of the Ph.D. condemns brilliant amateurs to the outer darkness—it would be nice if some legitimate examples were used.

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Occasionally someone treats the discovery of xenon fluoride (see WELCOME, STRANGER, F & SF, November 1963) as an example of the manner in which stodgy theories actually inhibit experimentation.

I can hear them say it:—"Stupid lazy chemists just got the idea into their heads that the noble gases formed no compounds so no one bothered to try to see if they *could* form compounds. After all, if everyone *knows* that something can't be done, why try to do it? And yet, if, at any time, any chemist had simply bothered to mix xenon and fluorine in a nickel container—"

It does sound very stupid of a chemist not to stumble on something that easy, doesn't it? Just mix a little xenon and fluorine in a nickel container, and astonish the world, and maybe win a Nobel Prize.

But do you know what would have happened if the average chemist in the average laboratory had tried to mix a little xenon (very rare and quite expensive, by the way) with a little fluorine? A bad case of poisoning, very likely, and, quite possibly, death.

If you think I'm exaggerating, let's consider the history of fluorine. That history does not begin with fluorine itself—a pale yellow-green assassin never seen by human eyes until eighty years ago—but with an odd mineral used by German miners about five hundred years ago.

The substance is mentioned by the first great mineralogist of modern times, George Agricola. In 1529, he described its use by German miners. The mineral melted easily (for a mineral) and when added to ore being smelted, the entire mixture melted more easily, thus bringing about a valuable saving of fuel and time.

Something which is liquid, flows, and the Latin word for "to flow" is "fluere", from which we get "fluid" (for any substance, like a liquid or gas, that flows) and "fluent" (to describe an easy flow of words). From the same root comes the word Agricola used for the mineral that liquefied and flowed so easily. That word was "fluores."

In later years, it came to be called "fluorspar", since "spar" is an old miners' term for "rock." Then, when it became customary to add the suffix "-ite" to the names of minerals, a new alternate name was "fluorite." (The name had an important descendant when it was discovered that fluorite, upon exposure to light of one wavelength, gave off light of a longer wavelength. That process came to be known as "fluorescence.")

Fluorite is still used today as a flux (or liquefier) in the making of steel. Centuries pass but a useful property remains a useful property.

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In 1670, a German glass-cutter, Heinrich Schwanhard, was working with fluorite and exposing it, for some reason, to the action of strong acids. A vapor was given off and Schwanhard bent close to watch. His spectacles clouded and, presumably, he may have thought the vapor had condensed upon them.

The cloud did not disappear, however, and on closer examination, the spectacles proved to have been etched. The glass had actually been partly dissolved and its smooth surface roughened.

This was very unusual, for few chemicals attack glass, which is one of the reasons chemists use glassware for their equipment. Schwanhard saw a Good Thing in this. He learned to cover portions of glass objects with wax (which protected those portions against the vapors) and etched the rest of the glass. In this way, he formed all sorts of delicate figures in clear glass against a cloudy background. He got himself patronized by the Emperor and did very well, indeed.

But he kept his process secret and it wasn't until 1725 that chemists, generally, learnt of this interesting vapor.

Through the 18th Century, there were occasional reports on fluorite. A German chemist, Andreas Sigismund Marggraf, showed, in 1768, that fluorite did not contain sulfur. He also found that fluorite, treated with acid, produced a vapor that chewed actual holes in his glassware.

However, it was a Swedish chemist, Carl Wilhelm Scheele, who really put the glass-chewing gas on the map in 1771. He, too, acidified fluorite and etched glass. He studied the vapors more thoroughly than any predecessor and maintained the gas to be an acid. Because of this, Scheele is commonly given the credit for having discovered this "fluoric acid" (as it was termed for about a quarter of a century).

The discovery, unfortunately, did Scheele's health no good. He isolated a large number of substances and it was his habit to smell and taste all the new chemicals he obtained, in order that this might serve as part of the routine characterization. Since in addition to the dangerous "fluoric acid", he also isolated such nasty items as hydrogen sulfide (the highly poisonous rotten-egg gas we commonly associate with school chemistry laboratories) and hydrogen cyanide (used in gas-chamber executions), the wonder is that he didn't die with the stuff in his mouth.

His survival wasn't total, though, for he died at the early age of 44, after some years of invalidship. There is no question in my mind but that his habit of sniffing and sipping unknown chemicals drastically shortened his life.

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While most chemists are very careful about tasting, by the way, much more careful than poor Scheele ever was, this cannot be said about smelling, even today. Chemists may not deliberately go about sniffing at things, but the air in laboratories is usually loaded with gases and vapors and chemists often take a kind of perverse pleasure in tolerating this, and in reacting with a kind of superior amusement at the non-chemists who make alarmed faces and say "phew."

This may account for the alleged shortened life expectancy of chemists generally. I am not speaking of this shortened life expectancy as an established fact, please note, since I don't know that it is. I say "alleged." Still, there was a letter recently in a chemical journal by someone who had been following obituaries and who claimed that chemists died at a considerably younger age, on the average, than did scientists who were not chemists. This could be so.

There were also speculations some years back that a number of chemists showed mental aberrations in later years through the insidious long-term effects of mercury poisoning. This came about through the constant presence of mercury vapor in the laboratory, vapor that ascended from disregarded mercury droplets in cracks and corners. (All chemists spill mercury now and then.)

To avoid creating alarm and despondency, however, I might mention that some chemists lived long and active lives.* The prize specimen is the French chemist, Michel-Eugène Chevreul, who was born in 1786 and died in 1889 at the glorious age of 103! What's more, he was active into advanced old age, for in his nineties, he was making useful studies on gerontology (the study of the effect of old age on living organisms) using himself (who else) as a subject. He attended the elaborate celebration of the centennial of his own birth and was exuberantly hailed as the "Nestor of science." Indeed, I know of no other scientist of the first class who passed the age of 100. If a Gentle Reader knows of one, please let me have the information.

Of course, Chevreul worked with such non-dangerous substances as waxes, soaps, fats and so on, but consider then the German chemist, Robert Wilhelm Bunsen. As a young man he worked with organic compounds of arsenic and poisoned himself nearly to the point of death. At the age of 25, one of those compounds exploded and caused him to lose the sight of one eye. He survived, however, and went on to attain the respectable age of 88.

* And to those Loyal Readers who may be concerned about my personal welfare, I must admit that for many years now I have entered chemistry laboratories only at rare intervals.

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Yet it remains a fact that many of the chemists, in the century after Scheele, who did major work on "fluoric acid" died comparatively young.

Once Scheele had established the gas produced from acidified fluorite to be an acid, a misconception at once arose as to its structure. The great French chemist, Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier, had decided at just about that time that all acids contained oxygen and, indeed, the word "oxygen" is from the Greek phrase meaning "acid-producer."

It is true that many acids contain oxygen (sulfuric acid and nitric acid are examples) but some do not. Consider, for instance, a compound called "muriatic acid", from a Latin word meaning "brine" because the acid could be obtained by treating brine with sulfuric acid.

It was supposed, following Lavoisier's dictum, that muriatic acid contained oxygen, was perhaps a compound of oxygen with an as-yet-unknown element called "murium." Scheele found that on treating muriatic acid with certain oxygen-containing compounds, a greenish gas was obtained. He assumed that muriatic acid had added on additional oxygen and named the gas "oxymuriatic acid."

The English chemist, Humphry Davy, however, after careful work with muriatic acid was able to show that the acid did not contain oxygen. Rather it contained hydrogen and was probably a compound of hydrogen and an as-yet-unknown element. Furthermore if oxygen combined with muriatic acid, the chances were that it combined with the hydrogen, pulling it away and leaving the as-yet-unknown element in isolation. The greenish gas which Scheele had called oxymuriatic acid, was, Davy decided, that element, and in 1810 he renamed it "chlorine" from the Greek word for "green" because of its color.

Since muriatic acid is a compound of hydrogen and chlorine, it came to be known as "hydrogen chloride" (in gaseous form) or "hydrochloric acid" (in water solution).

Other acids were also found to be free of oxygen. Hydrogen sulfide and hydrogen cyanide are examples. (They are very weak acids, to be sure, but the oxygen-in-acid proponents could not fall back on the assumption that oxygen is required for *strong* acids, since hydrochloric acid, though not containing oxygen, is, nevertheless, a strong acid.)

Davy went on to show that fluoric acid was another example of an acid without oxygen. Furthermore, fluoric acid had certain properties that were quite reminiscent of hydrogen chloride. It occurred to a French physicist, André Marie Ampère, therefore, that fluoric acid

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might well be a compound of hydrogen with an element very like chlorine. He said as much to Davy who agreed.

By 1813, Ampère and Davy were giving the new element (not yet isolated or studied) the same suffix as that possessed by chlorine in order to emphasize the similarity. The stem of the name would come from fluorite, of course, and the new element was "fluorine", a name that has been accepted ever since. Fluoric acid became "hydrogen fluoride" and fluorite became "calcium fluoride."

The problem now arose of isolating fluorine so that it might be studied. This proved to be a problem of the first magnitude. Chlorine could be isolated from hydrochloric acid by having oxygen, so to speak, snatch the hydrogen from chlorine's grip, leaving the latter isolated and in elementary form. Oxygen was more active than chlorine, you see, and pulled more strongly at hydrogen than chlorine could.

The same procedure could not, however, be applied to hydrogen fluoride. Oxygen could not, under any conditions, snatch hydrogen from the grip of fluorine. (It was found, many years later, that elementary fluorine could, instead, snatch hydrogen from oxygen. Fluorine, in reacting with water—a compound of hydrogen and oxygen—snatches at the hydrogen with such force that the oxygen is liberated in the unusually energetic form of ozone.)

The conclusion was inescapable that fluorine was more active than chlorine and oxygen. In fact, there seemed reason to suspect that fluorine might be the most active element in existence (a deduction that later chemists amply confirmed) and that no simple chemical reaction could liberate fluorine from compounds such as hydrogen fluoride or calcium fluoride, since no other element could force hydrogen or calcium out of the strong grip of fluorine.

But then, who says it is necessary to restrict one's self to chemical reactions? In 1800, the electric battery was invented and within weeks, it had been found that an electric current passing through a compound could split it apart ("electrolysis") where ordinary chemical reactions might be able to perform that task only under extreme conditions. Water, for instance, was broken up to hydrogen and oxygen. Hydrogen (and various metals) can be made to appear at the negative electrode, while oxygen (and other non-metals) can be made to appear at the positive electrode.

Davy applied this technique to various compounds which chemists were sure contained still-unknown metals that were so active that ordinary chemical techniques did not suffice to break them loose. In 1807 and 1808, making use of the most powerful electric battery

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that had yet been constructed, he quickly isolated six extremely active metals: potassium, sodium, calcium, magnesium, strontium, and barium. All appeared at the negative electrode, of course.

There was no reason, it seemed to Davy, that the same technique might not work with calcium fluoride. Here the calcium would appear at the negative electrode and fluorine at the positive. He tried it and got nowhere. Oh, he might have isolated fluorine at the positive electrode, but as soon as it was formed, it attacked whatever was in sight: water, glass, even silver or platinum, which Davy had used as his container. In no time at all, Davy had fluorine compounds on his hands, but no fluorine.

It was a losing proposition in another way, too, for Davy managed to be severely poisoned during his work on fluorine compounds, through breathing small quantities of hydrogen fluoride. It didn't kill him, but it undoubtedly contributed to the fact that he died at the age of 50 after some years of invalidship.

Others were less lucky than Davy, even. In the 1830's two English brothers, Thomas and George Knox decided not to take it for granted that fluorine could not be liberated by chemical means (scientists are not as stodgy as their critics like to pretend). They tried to coax chlorine into reacting with mercury fluoride, accepting the mercury and liberating the fluorine. They failed, and both underwent long and agonizing sieges of hydrogen fluoride poisoning.

A Belgian chemist, P. Louyet, who had followed the attempts of the Knox brothers closely, tried to repeat their work, and failed even more spectacularly. He was entirely killed by hydrogen fluoride.

One of Louyet's assistants was the French chemist, Edmound Frémy. He had watched some of Louyet's experiments and decided that trying to isolate fluorine by chemical reactions got one nothing but a ticket to the morgue. He returned to Davy's electrolytic method and worked with the most gingerly caution. His reward was that he lived to be 80.

In 1855, he repeated Davy's attempt to electrolyze calcium fluoride with the same results—any fluorine that developed tackled everything in reach and was gone at once.

He next decided to work with hydrogen fluoride itself. Hydrogen fluoride is a liquid at slightly less than room temperatures and can be more easily dealt with. It needn't be kept red-hot during the electrolysis as calcium fluoride has to be.

Unfortunately, hydrogen fluoride in Frémy's day was always obtained in water solution. To try to electrolyze a water solution of hydro-

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gen fluoride meant that one of two elements might come off at the positive electrode, oxygen or fluorine. Since oxygen was less active and more easily pulled away from hydrogen, only oxygen appeared at the electrode if there was even a small quantity of water present in the hydrogen fluoride.

Frémy therefore worked out methods for producing completely water-free hydrogen fluoride; "anhydrous hydrogen fluoride". He was the first to do so. Unfortunately, he found himself stymied. Anhydrous hydrogen fluoride would not pass an electric current. If he added some water, an electric current would pass,—but only oxygen would be produced.

In the end, he, too, gave up and as the 1880's dawned, fluorine was still victor. It had defeated the best efforts of many first-class chemists for three-quarters of a century; had invalided some and killed others outright.

Frémy had a student, the French chemist, Ferdinand Frédéric Henri Moissan, who took up the battle, and proceeded to attack the fluorine problem with bulldog tenacity.

He went back to chemical methods once again. He decided he must begin with a fluorine compound that was relatively unstable. The more stable a compound after all, the more tightly fluorine is holding the other atoms and the more difficult it is to pry that fluorine loose.

In 1884, Moissan came to the conclusion that phosphorous fluoride was comparatively unstable (for a fluoride). This seemed particularly hopeful since phosphorus happened to be unusually avid in its tendency to combine with oxygen. Perhaps in this case, oxygen could pull atoms away from fluorine. Moissan tried and succeeded only partially. The oxygen grabbed at the phosphorus all right but the fluorine did not let go and Moissan ended with a compound in which phosphorus was combined with both oxygen and fluorine.

Moissan tried another track. Platinum is an extremely inert metal; even fluorine attacks it only with difficulty. Hot platinum, however, does seem to have the ability to combine easily with phosphorus. If he passed phosphorus fluoride over hot platinum, would the platinum perhaps combine with phosphorus rather than with fluorine, and set the fluorine free?

No such luck. Both phosphorus and fluorine combined with the platinum and in a matter of minutes, a lot of expensive platinum was ruined for nothing. (Fortunately for Moissan, he had a rich father-in-law.)

Moissan, like Frémy before him, decided to back away from straight chemistry and try electrolysis.

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He began with arsenic fluoride and after fiddling with that, unsuccessfully, he decided to abandon that line of investigation because he was beginning to suffer from arsenic poisoning. So he turned to hydrogen fluoride (and underwent four different episodes of hydrogen fluoride poisoning, which helped bring him to his death at the age of 54).

Moissan remembered perfectly well that Frémy's anhydrous hydrogen fluoride would not carry an electric current. Something had to be added to make it do so, but not something that would offer an alternate element for production at the positive electrode. Why not another fluoride? Moissan dissolved potassium hydrogen fluoride in the anhydrous hydrogen fluoride and had a mixture which could pass a current and which could produce only fluorine at the positive electrode.

Furthermore, he made use of equipment built up out of an alloy of platinum and iridium, an alloy that was even more resistant to fluorine than platinum itself was.

Finally, he brought his entire apparatus to —50° C. All chemical reactions are slowed as temperature decreases and at —50° C. even fluorine's savagery ought to be subdued.

Moissan turned on the current and hydrogen bubbled off the negative electrode like fury, but nothing showed at the positive electrode. He stopped to think. The positive electrode was inserted into the platinum-iridium vessel through a stopper. The stopper had to be an insulator so it couldn't be platinum or any metal; and that stopper had been eaten up by fluorine. No wonder he hadn't gotten any gas.

Moissan needed a stopper made of something that would not carry an electric current and would be untouched by fluorine. It occurred to him that the mineral, fluorite, already had all the fluorine it could carry and would not be attacked further. He therefore carefully carved stoppers out of fluorite and repeated the experiment.

On June 26, 1886, he obtained a pale yellow-green gas about his positive electrode. Fluorine had finally been isolated, and when Moissan later repeated the experiment in public, his old teacher Frémy watched.

Moissan went on, in 1899, to discover a less expensive way of producing fluorine. He made use of copper vessels. Fluorine attacked copper violently, but after the copper was overlaid with copper fluoride, no further attacks need be expected. In 1906, the year before his death, Moissan received the Nobel Prize in chemistry for his feat.

Even so, fluorine remained the bad boy of the table of elements for another generation. It could be isolated and used; but not easily and not often. Most of all, it couldn't be handled with anything but supreme caution for it was even more poisonous than hydrogen fluoride.

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Meanwhile the noble gases were discovered in the 1890's and although they were recognized as being extremely inert, chemists tried over and over to force them into some kind of compound formation. (Don't believe the myth that chemists were so sure that the noble gases wouldn't react that they never tried to test the fact. Dozens of compounds were reported in the literature—but the reports, until quite recently, always proved to be mistaken.)

It wasn't until the early 1930's that chemical theory had been developed to the point where one need no longer tackle the noble gases at random in an effort to form compounds. The American chemist, Linus Pauling, in 1933, was able to show, through logical arguments, that xenon ought to be able to form compounds with fluorine. Almost at once two chemists at Pauling's school, the California Institute of Technology, took up the challenge. They were Donald M. Yost and Albert L. Kaye.

All the xenon they could get hold of was 100 cc. worth at normal air pressure and they could get hold of no fluorine. They had to rig up a device of their own to prepare fluorine; and it worked only intermittently. Doing the best they could, they found they could obtain no clear signs of any compound. Neither were they completely certain that no compound had been formed. The results were inconclusive.

There was no immediate follow-up. The results didn't warrant it. Chemists knew the murderous history of fluorine, and enthusiasm for such experiments ran low.

During World War II, fluorine was needed in connection with atomic bomb research. Under that kind of pressure, methods for the production of fluorine in quantity, and *in reasonable security* were developed.

By the 1950's, it was finally possible to run non-military experiments, involving fluorine, without much risk of suicide. Even then, there were only a few laboratories equipped for such work and those had a great many things to do with the fluorine other than mixing them with noble gases.

"Just mix xenon and fluorine in a nickel container" indeed. It could not have been done, in reasonably safety and with reasonable hopes of success, any more than ten years before it actually was done in 1962; and, under the circumstances, the ten years delay was a remarkably reasonable one and reflects no discredit whatsoever on Science.

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Hal Moore is a writer and photographer whose work has appeared in a wide variety of publications. Perhaps the combination of the two occupations explains the striking visuality of this fine story of a young girl who, in one brief and terrible incident, begins to move from the innocence of youth toward something more than womanhood.

SEA BRIGHT

by Hal R. Moore

SHE MATERIALIZED OUT OF settling surf foam, laughing, her hair caked with sand, salt water streaming along the sides of her face, exhilarated after a long, white-water thrill ride, body surfing from out where the largest breakers curl. She might have been Poseidon's daughter; certainly she was a child of beach and sea. She dug her tiny fingers into the sand, still laughing, resisting momentarily the back wash of out-flowing water, gathering the strength of her eleven-year-old body to plunge surfward again for yet another race with the sea god's white maned horses.

He came trudging along the sand, the frail lad who feared the sea as she loved it, stepping gingerly so as not to wet his feet, blue eyes wide with apprehension and mistrust of the sea, yet obviously pleased to find Kellie there.

Kellie held her breath briefly, as if it might make herself invisible, wishing he would go away. He would spoil the mood. Spoil the sea.

Not that she disliked the boy. He had been brought to the winter beach to regain his lost health, she knew. And perhaps he would, if a wind did not blow him away, or a piper frighten him to death, or a sand flea devour him whole. But the sea was her playmate now and she wanted no other.

Reluctantly, though, she put aside the urge to race the ebb surfward, for Grange had something in his hands, something which delighted him, making his too-round eyes shine, and he was bringing it to show her, braving much, for him, in the sucking wetness of sea soaked sand at water's edge. That valor alone demanded she wait for him, even without the force of a

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first chill of apprehension to stay her.

"Look, Kellie, at the shell I found!" He held it out to her, gleaming milk white in the late afternoon sun.

Kellie separated herself with effort from the sea, wrenching spirit and body from the caress and cradle of the cold Pacific. She stared at the gleaming, tapered shell Grange clutched so happily, and the apprehension settled dew-like upon her, pimpling her skin.

"Where did you get that?" Kellie demanded, fearful without knowing why.

"I found it on the beach. I guess a wave washed it up."

"There aren't any shells like that on this beach."

Grange did not seem to hear. "I found it on the beach."

"Throw it away," Kellie commanded.

"I found it."

"It isn't from this beach," Kellie said, not understanding her own feelings of revulsion the shell suddenly had kindled, but yielding readily enough to them.

"I'll bet you can hear the ocean in it." He raised it toward his ear, childish delight already widening his pinched face into a monkey-like grin.

Kellie was not one to reason every breath of the day. There were times, riding a wave, or scuttling crab-like across a sandy bottom, or stroking cross grain to a rip when you just *did*. That was how it was in the sea. You just lived. Now, living, Kellie did not reason. From her one-ness with the sea she acted.

"Stop that!" she cried. In a bound she was at his side. She seized the shell, wrenched it from him, hid it behind her back. "Go home," she said.

Astonishment tore his face. "I want my shell!" The wail ripped from his throat, tore the beach air.

"Go home!" Kellie slapped him, hard, too hard across the face with her open hand. She was immediately sorry, and as bewildered at the act as he was. But it was done. She clutched the shell tightly behind her.

Trailing his scream behind him like visible sparks in the afternoon air, he ran. She watched him go, and tears briefly clouded her eyes. *Now* there'd be the devil to pay.

It was not a long way home, but it might have been miles, from the time taken and the way his cries penetrated the seashore block. Everyone heard, and everyone knew that Grange was in trouble again. Some winced. Some shrugged. A few worried.

Grange's father waited, assessing the quality of the keening as it drew closer, assessing it correctly as anguish, not disaster. He tried to square his shoulders, but the weight of life was too much, and he yielded to the easier posture of long habit.

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Melda, at least, was not home. That was something to be thankful for at a time like this.

"Maa-ma!" Grange screamed. He ducked through the lower half of the two-piece counter-door that was the entrance to the Sheldon Popcorn Shop. He spent one wary look on his father, but shrieked again the piercing plea for Melda.

"She's out. What happened?"

"Kellie took my shell!"

"I see." Morton Sheldon drew his breath in slowly, and stared out the open front of the stand, past the hopper of fresh-made corn, and he stared across the winter-bare sidewalk and past the beach and out along the stark lines of the fishing pier as if he really did see.

He breathed very slowly, savoring the sudden silence wrought by his son's knowledge that his mother was not there. There was nothing basically wrong with the boy, he knew, if only Melda . . .

"She took it from me, and if Mother was here she'd slap Kellie!"

Morton Sheldon spent a long, curious look on his son. Such a violent child for such a frail body, he thought.

"Well, she would," Grange said.

"I'm sure," Morton Sheldon said. In his mind he turned the problem this way and that. He *was* the boy's father. And if Grange was quick to call hurt, he *was* frail. He did need protection. But not over protection. That was the problem.

"It wouldn't be nice to slap Kellie," he said at length, having arrived at the decision after rejecting all other trends of thought.

"But she—"

"We must not go around slapping people, Grange. 'Blessed are the meek.' Remember, they tell you that in Sunday school."

"She took my shell!" Grange's face clouded, and tears shined readily in his dark blue eyes.

An indignity had been practiced. Violence must answer. It was the law of the land.

Morton Sheldon swallowed a long sigh. He laid a brown, weather cracked hand on his son's shoulder, and the boy burrowed instinctively into the warmth of the protection offered.

"Grange, I'm sure Kellie had a good reason."

A face appeared over the bottom half of the door then, a solemn, brown face, wet as sea sand, and seemingly half wet sand in itself, with ropes of algae for hair.

"Yes, Sir," Kellie said, her thin voice resonant from the depth of a burdening conviction. "I had a reason."

"She—"

"What was the reason, Kellie?" Morton Sheldon asked, shushing his son.

"I can't explain it, Mr. Sheldon."

"I see."

And if Morton Sheldon saw no more than the line of fishermen

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waiting on the pier, waiting for him to join them, if he saw only himself with faded jacket and a few bits of fishing tackle, with salt wind cracking his lips and hands, he saw enough that Kellie took her leave with permission.

She ran down the wide, empty walk, her feet curling wisps of December sand behind her, clutching the gleaming white shell, grasping the offender, imprisoning it against the rippled rib cage of her lithe body, ran toward home.

She met her father and mother half way home, or caught up with them, as they strolled peacefully along the walk, and she slowed.

Each of them noticed the shell. Her mother viewed it with mild curiosity, assessing it briefly with dark eyes dwelling in a sand-blasted face seared walnut dark from more than forty beach summers.

Her father touched it lightly with a pale blue gaze that had seen everything there was to see in all the ports of the world, and now paid attention to little except his wife and daughter.

Neither questioned her, but she sighed, and said: "You might as well know. I took it away from Grange."

"You shouldn't have done that," her mother said.

"I thought I should have."

"Why?"

"I just thought I should. I don't know why, exactly."

"Well, you'd better give it back."

"No. I can't do that."

Her mother laughed. She put a gentle hand on Kellie's shoulder, and spoke quietly, and with pride, but not to Kellie. "She's just like Mother. Same will of iron."

The sentiment was not new to Kellie. She had never known her grandmother, but her mother's rare references to her always cast Kellie in the same image and role.

"Is there a reason you can't give it back, Kellie?"

"I think so."

"What is it?"

"I can't explain it, Mother. It's —just something I feel."

They had stopped now at the front entrance of the combination beer parlor-home which had sustained the Bushner family, Kellie, Carrie and Ralph for all of Kellie's years and more before. In all her eleven years Kellie had never been allowed inside the taproom itself, though the family lived directly above it. Always she climbed the back stairs to the apartment, and to her room which looked directly out upon the ocean. Only her parents went in the front way, through the deep saloon smells of the taproom.

"Supper will be ready in about an hour, Kellie," Carrie Bushner said. "Either give the shell back to Grange or bring me a reason why you can't do so when you come in. Understand?"

"Yes. I understand."

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Carrie smiled and brushed sand from Kellie's forehead. She glanced at her husband, but he shook his head quietly, and Carrie went on in to the mysterious darkness alone.

Kellie stood silently, eyeing her father, waiting. He had stayed to tell her something. But for a long while he just rubbed the stubble of whiskers on his chin and stared out to sea.

"Why did you take it from him, Kellie?" he asked at last.

"I don't know, Daddy. I just had to."

Ralph Bushner said nothing for a long while again, though he did glance curiously at the shell. "Odd thing," he said, after a time.

"I don't think it came from this beach," Kellie said.

"No. Looks something like a Panama fighting conch. Except that the spines are too sharp. I don't remember seeing many conches with spines like that."

"It's—funny," Kellie said, searching for an appropriate word to describe the shell, but finding none. It was odd, and somehow, she knew, it was *wrong*. But she could not say why. From her closeness with the sea she just knew that it was.

"I don't remember ever seeing anything like it before," Ralph Bushner agreed.

"I just know it didn't come from this beach."

"No. Well—you'd better give it back, or have a good reason for your mother at supper time."

"I don't have a reason I can speak, Daddy. But I just can't let him have it."

"But if you don't give her a reason . . ."

"I know." As punishment for her deed she would be kept in her room for a week. The standard punishment. With nothing to do but stare out at the ocean and long for the embrace of the surf. "But couldn't you just sort of explain to her?"

"Your mother and I don't interfere with each other in certain things," he said, looking away.

Kellie sighed softly. Her father was so—so—*helpless* around her mother.

"All you have to do is give her a *reason*, Kellie."

"Daddy, I don't have a reason I can speak."

He rubbed the stubble on his chin, and looked long and searchingly at her. "There are reasons and reasons, Honey. Without some kind of reason there'll be the devil to pay."

"What do you mean?"

"Well—all she wants is a *reason*, Honey."

Kellie turned that puzzle over and over in her mind. When she found the answer it frightened her worse than any punishment she might receive. She was stunned at the thought of lying to her mother. Even a little, sort of invited lie.

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"I don't know the reason, Daddy. I only feel it," she said, and she turned and ran across the cracked, tilted sidewalk and onto the grey beach, and ran to the edge of the water, and stared at the waves, still clutching the shell, tears pushing from behind her eyes.

She stood and watched the breakers rolling, spreading themselves, their long journey over.

Just a few minutes ago her life had been so happy. And now, for no reason she could understand, it was shattered. For no reason she could tell even herself there was sudden fear, and anger, and hurt.

Why *had* she taken the shell from Grange? What had possessed her? *Why* had she done it?

Kellie did not know. There had been—a moment there in the sea ebb when laughter had faded and fear had struck and she had done the thing without reasoning. There was no *why*. Now, even the tears which should have flowed failed her.

Kellie spun suddenly in fear at the sound of footsteps crunching the sand behind her. She had been so deep in thought she had not heard the man until he was upon her.

"Hello there, Kellie." The voice was cheerful, but there was a tarry quality to it, like the black on the bottoms of people's feet sometimes when big tankers lay offshore.

"Hello, Mr. Rellman," she said, reluctantly, avoiding the curiously penetrating stare.

"That's a handsome shell you have, Kellie. Where did you get it?"

Kellie knew he knew where she got it. Everyone would know by now. "I took it away from Grange."

"Oh—well, I remember hearing now." He failed to conceal his surprise at her honesty. "Do you suppose I could see it, Kellie?" he asked, abashed.

"You're looking at it," Kellie said. Again he was abashed, this time at the rude answer.

She made no move to offer it for inspection. Instead she moved it to a tighter embrace. And it was as if by the same move she wished to move herself into the same protective hug.

Rellman knew she did not like him, and this cut him deeply. She always seemed to be hiding from him. Kellie's mother did not like him, either, he knew, though she had never said as much to him. Rellman was offended at this, because he was genuinely fond of Kellie, and of her mother, despite their coolness toward him.

Rellman knew he was not much to look at. A small man, wrinkled with time, and with a tendency to squint, eyes that watered too much from the sun's harsh glare, and nervous hands seeming to search endlessly through his pockets despite conscious efforts to control the nervous habit.

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But he did not think of himself as a bad sort. He loved children, especially girls, and even more especially Kellie, though he was somehow never popular with either children or adults, much to his distress.

"I'd like to listen to it, Kellie. I bet if I held it up to my ear I could hear the roar of the sea in it."

"Oh—no!" Kellie said, and unexplainable terror at the thought struck deep into her sun-bronzed belly, and turned her knees to paste. "No, you mustn't do that!"

"Just let me listen for a minute," he wheedled, trying a smile. But the smile was lacking teeth to even it out, and lacking real warmth, so it came out a grimace, frightening Kellie even more. And in a flash of insight well beyond her age or experience Kellie realized he cared nothing for listening to the shell. He wanted only for her to give it to him, to do as he said, to yield this small request so that he might make another small one, and then another—though to what end Kellie could not then divine.

But she saw suddenly, in awful clarity, into the depths of his eyes, past the veins wavering over yellowed whites, through the shielding wateriness bathing them, and she saw what he was. There were no words in her vocabulary or experience in her life to give a name to pederasty, but she knew instinctively and the revelation plunged her into an icy bath of shock.

She stared speechless, until suddenly fear firmed up the joints of her knees and she was mobile again, and moving, running down the beach, away, moving from under the cloud which had enveloped her sea bright world.

She ran blindly, hurtled unseeing until she crashed headlong into a woman's skirts, and clung there, breathing in sandy gasps, afraid to look behind her.

"Kellie, you could have hurt me!" The voice cut through her fog of terror, lifted her bodily back to the world she knew, had always and only known.

"I'm sorry," she said, meaning it truly. "I didn't know where I was going."

"I can see that."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Sheldon."

"Well, no harm done. Provided, of course, you are sorry about taking Grange's shell away from him."

"No, I'm not sorry about that," Kellie said, conscious again of her problem with the shell, clutching it tightly to her. She was conscious, too, of Grange lurking just behind his mother, shielded by her skirts as from an ogre.

"Well, you'll give it back at once!"

She was a stern woman, a little older than Kellie's mother, and pale, untouched by the beach sun, her features not exactly ugly, but set into a permanent frown.

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"I can't give it back, Mrs. Sheldon."

"You do so this instant!"

"I can't."

Kellie did not wait to reason or argue. She knew the woman would slap her if she did not give back the shell. Grange had said so.

Again she ran, beachward this time, to the edge of the water. Behind her Grange wailed, and his mother howled threats. She ran on, pursued by terrors unclothed in mere flesh, and she flung herself into the sea, falling headlong when water weight slowed her churning legs, and, falling, hurled the offending shell far, deep into the chewing mouth of a breaker which moments later gobbled up her too, to spit her out disdainfully at beach edge, exhausted, trembling with fear.

She lay in the ebb, and waves washed around her, and she moved her head up on her arm so she could breath. She made no move to rise as she heard footsteps approaching, and water carved away the sand, lowering her gently into a shallow pit.

She wished it would bury her, or wash her out to sea. But she knew neither would happen. She would have to get up, to face the suddenly warped new world she could not yet understand, but she resisted the move. She could not face explaining why she had thrown away the shell. She did not know herself. She knew only she was impelled, perhaps by the sea itself, to do so.

But the footsteps shuffling along the sand were not those of Mrs. Sheldon. That stern, disapproving woman had gone, probably to seek out Kellie's mother with her complaints.

"Aha!" the sticky voice said, and Rellman picked up the bright white sea shell from where it had washed up near Kellie. "Now I have it!"

Kellie raised herself on one elbow, stared fearfully at the man grinning crookedly at her. "Throw it back in the ocean," she pleaded.

"Oh, no. I want to hear the roar of the sea in it." He moved it toward his ear, teasingly.

"No!" Kellie screamed, seized by a warning from the waves she could feel but not understand.

He lowered it, raising his pale eyebrows. "No? What will you give me if I don't?"

Kellie had no idea what he thought she could give him, but the very thought terrified her, and she let herself fall limply to the sand again, crying now at last, the tears spilling away into the salt water, uniting with the ocean, an inverse communion between Kellie and her god father, Poseidon.

Laughing, ridicule in his tone, Rellman lifted the shell to his ear.

Kellie could not guess what it was he heard, but it was not the roar of the sea. That was swelling around them, a symphony of ocean

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sounds which played on endlessly for all to hear.

Only Rellman knew, and he would never be in condition to tell. Because of the juxtaposition in time and space which had placed Kellie, uniquely, in control of the shell, no one would ever know what he heard. Only Rellman, free of the delirium of his madness now and again would recall what the shell had told him.

In rare and brief moments of lucidity he would remember, before he slipped away into half-light again, that the shell had delivered to him its sinister message. It had told him what he was, had stripped away the protective, polished veneer of what he thought he was, and revealed him to himself, naked and without defense in the glare of reality. And as an added fillip, the shell had projected a scene out of some dim, miserable future in which Rellman was caught by a mob of maddened men and handled as many feel such as he should be handled. A scene in which he was torn and plucked and ripped by raging hands for a crime he could no more have avoided committing than could he have avoided living and dying. It was more than he, or any mortal could bear.

It would have been more than Grange could have borne, to know his nature and future. To see himself darting through life forever pursued by nameless fears and phantom foes, finally to be driven over the brink by insecurity when his mother died.

Nor were there many who could have borne it, human frailties being what they are. And the magnifying, distorting, malevolent evil of the shell being what it was.

Rellman screamed just once, choking on the sound, and the shell fell from limp fingers. He ran down the beach, his legs rubber, wobbling crazily as sand clutched at his feet. He ran until he collapsed on the sand and lay there, staring vacantly at the sky.

Numb with shock, Kellie watched as three men came from somewhere and stood over Rellman. One of them kneeled and loosened his collar, then rose again, and the men stood talking among themselves, wondering.

Slowly Kellie's fear washed away with the changing tide. She lifted herself slowly from the sand. Numbly she picked up the shell a last time and took it to the broad sidewalk, and searched until she found a stone large enough, and she pounded fiercely at the shell. It cracked, then shattered, splitting into a handfull of pieces, and she pounded, kept pounding, blindly, mindlessly, until there was nothing left except a scattered pile of dirty fragments, and still she pounded, her fingers cracked and bleeding now, until her father, out looking for her as

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dusk swept over the beach and out seaward, found her there.

"Why did you do that?" he asked, squatting down to be near her.

"I don't know," she said wearily. But she stopped pounding, tossed the rock aside, scattered the fragments into deep sand.

"It's time to go home, supper is almost ready."

"All right."

"Your mother is angry."

Kellie bit her lip, saying nothing.

"You'll just have to give her a pretty good reason. About the shell, I mean, or you know what will happen."

"I don't know the reason."

"Kellie, she doesn't *want* to punish you. Just give her a *reason*."

"I can't do that."

Together they climbed the grey, scarred old back stairs to the apartment over the taproom. Kellie could smell spaghetti cooking, and onions and meat sauce. One of her favorite dishes. But it was late, and her mother would be angry.

Her father held the door open for her, and she went in, he closing the door softly.

"That you Kellie?" from another room.

"Yes, Mother."

"All right. Wash up for supper."

"Yes, Mother."

She shot one last look at her father. He appealed mutely, his hands palms out, half in anguish, half in resignation.

Kellie, in a brief moment, thought of a thousand lies she could tell her mother to avoid punishment. But she knew that she could tell none of them. No more than she could tell the truth. No more than she knew the truth.

She knew only, subjectively, as intuitive children do, that her world would never be the same again. Kellie had not grown up, and would not, except through the usual process of passing years. But she knew that when again she was let out of her room, back to her fiercely possessive love affair with the sea, much of childhood would lay behind her.

Gone forever would be the freedom of childhood's unchallenging innocence. In its place the weight of a new responsibility would be thrust upon her, as upon precious few, to understand much that was lost to other humans. There would be challenges she would meet as unpopularly as she had met the challenge of the shell. And there would be explanations no more possible then than there were now.

"I don't know," she said simply without waiting to be questioned when her mother appeared. "I just don't know why I took it away from him."

And, for the first time in such punishments, there were no tears.

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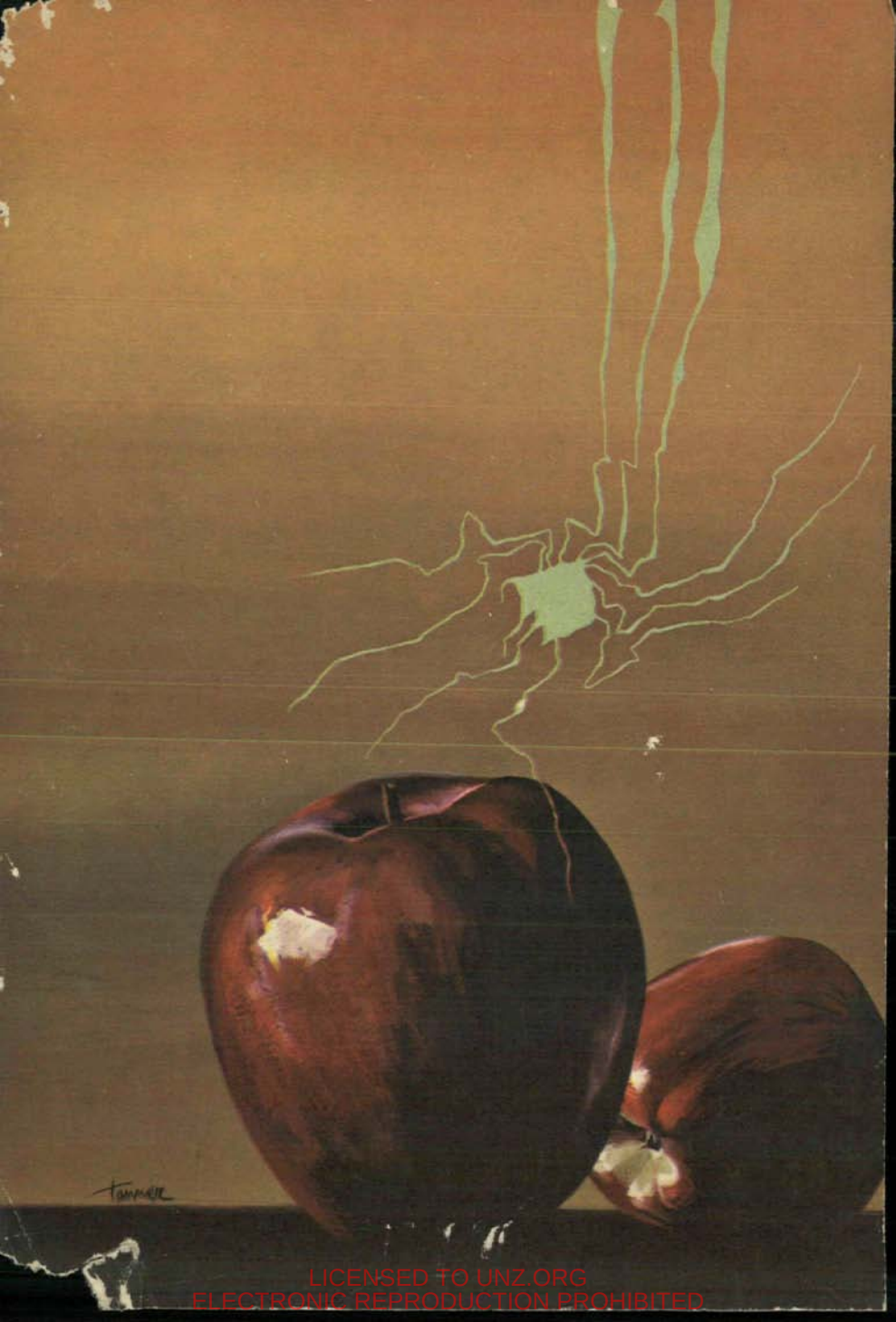

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